



BACCANO!

1935-D Luckstreet Boys

RYOHGO
NARITA



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ILLUSTRATION BY
KATSUMI ENAMI

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The casino party is finally underway. **Who will fortune favor?!**

According to Elmer C. Albatross...

"Actually, I think Huey and Fermet are really similar.

"Oh, no, I don't mean their looks. Although I guess metaphorically speaking, the faces they present to the world are alike."

"Deep down, I'd say they're polar opposites, but you can see plenty of parallels in what they end up doing. In that sense, they're superficially almost identical.

"Both Huey and Fermet love intrigues. You blink, and the next thing you know, they've thrown together these evil secret societies. It's really something.

"Well, as long as they're having fun. That's all that matters to me.

"Oh, right: one word of warning about those two.

"Their methods may be really similar, but there are differences.

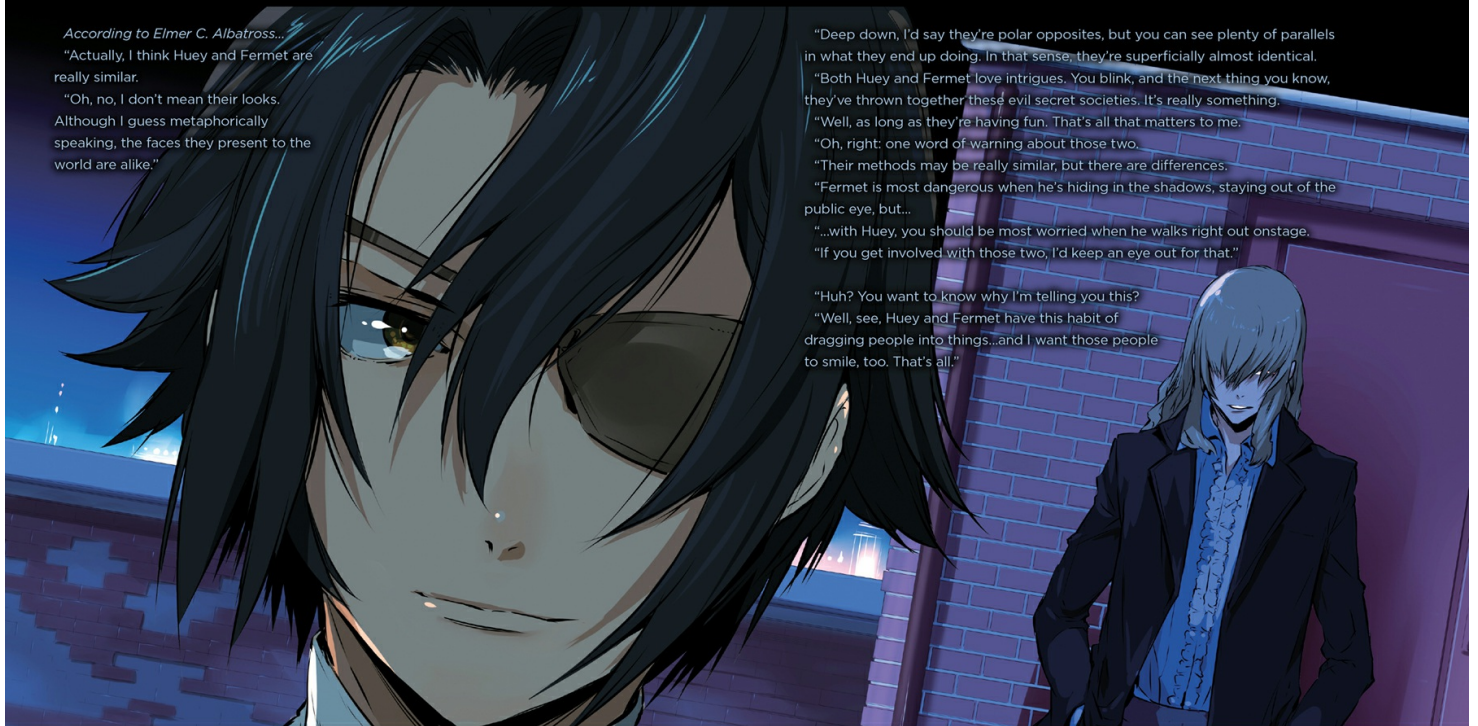
"Fermet is most dangerous when he's hiding in the shadows, staying out of the public eye, but...

"...with Huey, you should be most worried when he walks right out onstage.

"If you get involved with those two, I'd keep an eye out for that."

"Huh? You want to know why I'm telling you this?

"Well, see, Huey and Fermet have this habit of dragging people into things...and I want those people to smile, too. That's all."



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VOLUME 22

RYOHGO NARITA

ILLUSTRATION BY **KATSUMI ENAMI**



NEW YORK

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BACCANO!, Volume 22: 1935-D LUCKSTREET BOYS

RYOHGO NARITA

Translation by Taylor Engel

Cover art by Katsumi Enami

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Melvi Dormентаire	Hired by the Runorata Family as the main dealer for their casino party. Due to his personal history, he's after Szilard's knowledge. He's kidnapped Ennis and issued a challenge to Firo.
Firo Prochainezo	A young camorrista who runs the Martillo Family's casino. Furious about what Melvi did to Ennis, but he is ready to face him in earnest.
Vino	Actual name: Claire Stanfield. A wanderer who sometimes works as a hitman. Currently Melvi's hired guard.
Luck Gandor	The youngest of the three Gandor brothers. He's hired a crowd of hitmen and is currently at the casino party, sizing up who might turn against them.
Ladd Russo	A relative of the Russo Family boss. A murderer with several screws loose. He's signed on with the Gandor Family, but his goal is to raise hell at the party and, most of all, to kill Claire.
Huey Laforet	One of the immortals; Chané and Leeza's father. He's watching the casino party from a distance as a guest of the Runorata Family. Firo gouged out one of his eyes.
Bartolo Runorata	The boss of the Runorata Family, one of the East's biggest mafia syndicates. Also has ties to Senator Beriam and the Nebula Corporation. He's the one who set up this casino party, but his motives are unclear.
Manfred Beriam	A senator. He's guarded by Spike, an ex-Lemures sniper. He hired Pamela and Lana as maids and is having Spike help their companion Sonia improve her sniping skills. He seems to have an agenda...
Nader Schasschule	A man with ties to the <i>Flying Pussyfoot</i> . Miraculously survived a failed attempt to sell out the Lemures. He's attending the casino party as Eve Genoard's proxy gambler.
Jacuzzi Splot	A gang leader. Also a cowardly crybaby, even though he has a sword tattooed on his face. Nice's fella. He's attending the casino party to help out, but...
Isaac Dian & Miria Harvent	The same as always. They're also helping out at the casino party.

G Ennis	A homunculus Szilard created. Except for the fact that she's immortal, she's no different from a human. She's been kidnapped by Melvi and confined to a room on a ship.
V Victor Talbot	An immortal. He's the assistant director of a Division of Investigation department that handles immortal-related incidents. Since lots of immortals are involved in this one, he's getting dragged into it as well...
R Ronny Schiatto	A Martillo Family executive. Demon. He's distanced himself from this affair for personal reasons.
F Fred	A doctor known as "the gray magician" who saved Nader during the <i>Flying Pussyfoot</i> incident. He's taken on Ladd's pal Who as his assistant.
C Chané Laforet	Claire's girl. An expert knife fighter who's given up her voice. She's Huey's daughter, and both she and her sister, Leeza, are fiercely loyal to him. At the casino party, she's keeping an eye out for anyone who might get in Huey's way.
G Graham Specter	A wrecker who's Ladd's sworn brother. Has a wisecracking underling named Shaft and also knows Jacuzzi and Chané. He's wandering around the casino party with Ladd.
E Eve Genoard	She wanted to attend the casino party to search for her brother Dallas, but since she has no experience, she's hired Nader to gamble for her.
C Czeslaw Meyer	An immortal boy. He's uncomfortable around Claire. He's much craftier than his looks would suggest, but for all that, he tends to get swept along by the people around him. As it happens, he's ended up rescuing Nader.
P Pamela	A former casino breaker, she's just plied her skills under the mafia's nose for the first time in quite a while and got spotted by Nader. He ended up being a childhood friend of her companion Sonia, and then...
R Renee Parmedes Branvillier	A Nebula executive. She looks like a rather dim young lady, and that's exactly what she is. She's Chané and Leeza's mother.
C Christopher Shaldred	One of Huey's hand-raised homunculi. Has red eyes and dolphin teeth and walks like a vampire. He's friends with Ricardo, Placido Russo's grandkid.
L Lamia	An organization that works under Huey and is in NYC to guard him. Members include the Poet, who speaks very oddly; Sickie, a beauty with phenomenal capoeira skills; Rail, a bomb fiend with a scarred face; Frank, who's a huge kid; Hong Chi-Mei, who fights with iron claws; and Sham and Hilton, spies and message runners.

Interlude Couldn't Be Busier Organizing Information

"All right. Let's get our facts in order, shall we?"

When the voice spoke from behind the mountain of documents, the staff of the *Daily Days* newspaper nodded, their expressions focused.

"I'll start by explaining how it began, then. A few months ago, Firo Prochainezo, a young Martillo Family executive, temporarily infiltrated Alcatraz as part of a plea bargain with the Division of Investigation. He made contact with the terrorist Huey Laforet there, shortly before Huey himself vanished."

"You think Firo helped him break out?"

"No, I imagine his own organization helped him escape. However, we've received information that Huey is plotting something here in New York. Bartolo Runorata is harboring him on his property, as a guest," Nicholas reported. He was part of the old guard at the paper.

Elean, a man in Chinese robes, chimed in. "That means all of Laforet's handpicked terrorists are assembling in the city. They've already taken their airplanes out for a spin, and a group that'd be right at home in the circus is skulking around town... It's bedlam out there."

The unseen president responded from behind the documents. "A three-way standoff between Huey, the Division of Investigation, and the mafia would be bad enough. Now the House of Dormентаire, a European financial group, have joined the game as well. They're also linked closely to our 'top secret matter.' None of this goes in the paper."

At the *Daily Days*, the phrase *top secret matter* indicated something located beyond the bounds of common sense. It encompassed vampires, fairies, and other beings one would usually find in fantasy novels. Here in New York, though, most of the information they collected was about the "liquor of immortality," and about those who'd helped themselves to a glass of eternal

life.

In comparison, the top brass of the *Daily Days* newspaper had determined that all other things—including scandals related to politicians, mafia big shots, or even the president of the United States—were “just information.”

That top secret matter was the reason they were holding this emergency meeting.

“Still, who’d have thought most of those key figures would assemble at the underground-casino party at that new skyscraper, Ra’s Lance? Actually, an overwhelming proportion of immortals are denizens of the underworld. If you don’t count the hundreds of Nebula employees involved in that one experiment, of course.”

The next one to speak was Henry, a bespectacled man with gaunt cheeks and hair that had gone white in places.

“There are five main players. A ‘scratch group’ consisting of local juvenile delinquents and the Russo Family, formed around the Camorra known as the Martillo Family. The Runorata Family, one of the East’s leading mafia syndicates. The Gandor Family, which has hired a crowd of hitmen. A terrorist group led by the immortal Huey Laforet. And the House of Dormентаire, a large but fading financial group that has involved itself from Europe. The Division of Investigation, Senator Beriam, and the staff of Nebula also seem to be acting suspiciously behind the scenes...”

Rachel finally joined the conversation; she was holding a sheaf of papers. “And? Who is this Nader Schasschule guy? He keeps coming up, but I don’t see a connection to any of these organizations. I’ve never even heard his name in New York before.”

Henry pushed his glasses up with a smirk. “Come on, Rachel, *you* have a connection to the man. After all, you were involved in the Flying Pussyfoot incident... If there is a link between four of those major players, then, would it be Huey’s former faction?”

She looked at him quizzically. “I’ve never heard a man with that name was on the train.”

“That’s because he wasn’t. He couldn’t be. He tried to sell out the black suits—the Lemures—and was nearly killed in the process. Well, by some miracle, he survived. Thanks to his betrayal, the police force got their hands on quite a bit of information about the Lemures.”

“Oh, right. Now I remember... But why is he part of this? This says he’s at the casino party as a proxy gambler for Eve Genoard...?” Rachel frowned.

Henry shook his head slightly. “I really don’t know. Nader Schasschule... I checked into him, and from what I’ve seen, the man is an enigma. He doesn’t have nearly as much of a presence as, say, Firo, Bartolo, and Huey. One could even say he’s the only player on the board right now who’s incapable of pulling his weight. I’d guess that he stumbled into it by mistake...or that someone’s setting him up to take a heavy fall.”

Henry hadn’t immediately dismissed Nader upon learning of his involvement. It was just that Henry had yet to find anything special in Nader’s history, and unlike the immortals, Nader didn’t seem to have any unique abilities.

However, as he tried to brush the question aside, the voice behind the documents interrupted him. “I’m not so sure about that.”

“President?”

“Oh, I’m not suggesting he has hidden connections or anything special in his background. It’s simply wiser not to make light of anyone, period.” Although the president was admonishing his subordinate, he sounded amused by the whole situation. “In any case, he is involved, and that fact carries weight. Everyone—from our central player Huey Laforet to a traveler who just happens to walk past the venue—is brimming with valuable information.”

“Well, yes, but...”

“No matter how heroic or villainous a man is, he’s a cipher until the moment he *does something*. Those of us who deal in information can’t ignore anyone who’s involved in this incident. For example—when that robber couple came to New York in 1930, did even one of you manage to predict they would become so deeply involved in this top secret matter before it happened?”

The room fell silent.

Once he'd given them a moment, the president continued lightly, as if he were joking. "Only someone with precognition could have known. If we had a prophet like that in town, someone whose predictions were always accurate, that would be yet another top secret matter."

The president paused. When he went on, the words seemed more for his own benefit than for theirs.

"Still, speaking of top secret matters... That demon was the cause of the whole 'liquor of immortality' affair and everything that followed. I wonder where he is and what he's doing now."

Chapter 23 The Demon Doesn't Forget His Promises

The ritual had been conducted on the deck of a certain ship, out on the ocean.

Although it was far smaller than the *Titanic* and other *Olympic*-class ships, the steamship was over three hundred feet long, and it cut an imposing figure among the surrounding waves.

However, there was *something* that had appeared on its deck, its eerie aura far surpassing that of the steamship, leaving its passengers in awe.

“I see... Intriguing.”

The *thing* spoke quietly. The assembly on the ship's deck—men and women dressed in old-fashioned robes, a group that seemed out of place in the twentieth century—weren't able to locate the speaker. It hadn't even shown itself, but its voice made their hearts tremble with fear.

As the saying goes, many people feel a deeper fear of the things they can't wrap their minds around, things that defy logic or words, than they do of the devil they know.

Until they heard its voice, the robed group on the deck had thought they understood this being to a certain extent. They'd thought they were able to describe it. They'd even believed it was possible to control it.

However, the moment they heard *its* voice echo directly into their minds, they experienced something.

It's here. It's actually here.

Terror.

We called it. We are responsible for this.

And regret.

They rued their own foolishness.

They'd been manipulated by money, the knowledge they'd been given, and the existence of immortality. Without any deep knowledge of alchemy or theology, they'd summoned *a being*.

They weren't well versed in other religions, and they didn't even respect them. Too late, these followers of a new pseudoreligion realized what a preposterous thing they had called forth.

A demon.

They'd simply shoved everything onto a word they were already familiar with, then assumed they understood it.

And as that realization sank in, the *thing* named itself, as if mocking them. "What's the matter? The alchemists who summoned me previously called me a demon. No doubt you were also told that was what I was. This is tiresome. You may simply call me 'demon.'"

The unsettling, apparently sourceless voice addressed the sham religious group on the deck.

"Was this scheme Melvi Dormентаire's? Or do I have the House of Dormентаire's crafty vixen to thank? Did my fellow demon Rosetta contact you and put the idea into your heads? No, that's the sort of thing a snot-nosed child would think up... Well, never mind."

The self-proclaimed demon's voice echoed across the deck, idle but imposing.

"Now then, where are we? ...I see. The south of India. The insolence of summoning me all the way out here from New York... And? What knowledge do you seek?"

This was a clear question, and although there was fear in his eyes, one of the robed men managed to calm himself enough to speak. "A-are you truly...erm, the being the House of Dormентаire said was omniscient and omnipotent?"

"I reject the assertion that I'm omniscient and omnipotent, but I am the entity of which the House of Dormентаire spoke, yes. Now then, I believe I've given you the knowledge you sought: information about myself. Good-bye."

“Wha—?! W-wait!”

“I’m joking. I wouldn’t do that, and anyway, that trope is worn out. I did try it once before, but for a while afterward, I was saddled with a reputation as an immature nitpicker. Well, never mind.”

From its tone, the group could imagine the demon shrugging—but without being able to see it, they had no way to confirm the impression.

“Y-you’ll give us...any information at all? W-would you show yourself to us first?”

“I’m already aware that you didn’t summon me at this particular time by coincidence.”

“? At this particular time...? Wh-what do you mean?”

“...Hmm. I see you don’t possess knowledge of the situation. Disposable pawns of the Dormentaires, are you? Well, never mind.”

The demon changed the subject and began to act out his original role, on a stage similar to the ship in 1711. “And? What knowledge do you seek? The alchemists who previously summoned me wished for knowledge of immortality. So did the group before them. Others have wished for the truth of the universe or a way to refine gold from iron, even to know whether God truly exists. Let me warn you that you may not be able to use the knowledge you gain immediately. For example, transmuting gold won’t be possible with current technology.”

“W-wait, couldn’t you just tell us everything there is to know?”

“Greedy, aren’t you. There would be no end to that. According to the contract by which you summoned me, I can generally give you knowledge about one thing, and assorted corollaries that accompany it. If you wish to know about immortality, for example, the method for creating a particular liquor as a means to that end would be considered secondary.”

“...We’d like to talk it over carefully before we decide. Would you wait a little while? We weren’t told we’d be given only one piece of knowledge.”

“...”

Just a moment ago, the robed group had feared the demon's voice. Now, they seemed to believe that the summoning ritual had put it under their complete control. Gradually regaining their presence of mind, they began a shrewd discussion about what would come next.

From somewhere on the ship, the demon watched their faces fill with greed. It sighed. "For goodness' sake... While this is a personal matter, in the past I've decided to show myself and shock the ones who summoned me, just to make sure they remembered my face. However, I'd rather you lot *didn't* remember it. I'll just use my voice to deal with you."

His complaint went unnoticed. The robed group continued their chaotic discussion—although no actual discussion was taking place. They were just asserting their own demands and talking over each other all at once.

While it waited, the demon collected information on them from around the world.

I see. As I thought, they're a brand-new religion. Well, calling it a religion would be rude to the truly religious. This is how people end up when their childish admiration of secret societies gets the better of them. They never learn to sublimate those feelings into positive action.

The whiskered individual in the center has some sort of social rank; that's how he's managed to keep this group together. And then the House of Dormентаire capitalized on it.

As if the demon had seen the group's past personally, it understood many things in an instant. Then, having anticipated what would happen next, it made an additional remark to this magicians' club.

"Let me tell you one thing: I have no knowledge of future events. Therefore, if you ask for accurate information about something that's going to happen, I won't be able to comply."

"R-right. We know that. Anyone who could do that would be a god."

"..."

Silently, the demon reflected on his own past.

He'd been created in a sealed flask, as a "double of the universe."

In the beginning, Ronny had been a nameless homunculus.

While he could understand human speech and possessed human awareness, he had been created to be one with everything in the cosmos, including its past and future. In exchange for being unable to leave that flask, he had possessed the sum of all knowledge.

He had been capable of what the robed man had called a divine feat: knowing the future.

He could manipulate the world as adroitly as if it were his own hands or feet or fingertips. If he wanted to, he could stop its time as easily as a human could stop moving.

Through interacting with the alchemist who'd created him, the omniscient, omnipotent homunculus had ultimately taken human shape to manifest in the outside world. He had lost his knowledge of the future and some of his brain's processing abilities, but in return, he'd cast his physical body out into the universe and taken his true form.

After the alchemist's death, he'd inherited the man's name. While he was an entity known as a demon, he'd lived as a human as well.

There were several others like me, but they all kept their knowledge of the future, choosing to relinquish most of their ability to interfere with the world instead.

Human bodies weren't able to contain all the knowledge and abilities they'd had as twins of the world. That meant they had to choose something to abandon. This particular demon had discarded his knowledge of the future but kept his ability to interfere powerfully with other people and the world.

That was why he was able to perform feats befitting a demon.

If you change the future based on your knowledge of it, knowledge of the changed future automatically appears in your mind. I'm sure it's convenient. Still...the goal of my birth was to stave off boredom. For me, giving up the ability to know the future was the right choice.

The memory of Rosetta, a female homunculus, crossed his mind. Ronny Schiatto—the demon who'd inherited the name of an alchemist—had some thoughts.

...I wanted to stave off boredom, hmm?

Yes, the Martillo Family never bores me. They're a good syndicate—a superior worthy of respect, companions I can be frank with, a pupil who's worth teaching how to wield a knife.

It's a good place.

No... It's a good family.

In the darkness, the demon smiled. Then he called to the group, which was still engaged in its heated, obsessive discussion.

"I have one more thing to tell you."

"...?"

"I'm not simply a system for granting others' wishes. I am neither a god nor an impartial judge of hell. I have what you humans would term 'emotions,' and I possess both ideals and a dream. And my dream is quite twisted—it's one that was planted in me by the ancient alchemists."

"Wh-what is it?"

The demon wasn't about to say it was leaving because they'd taken too long, was it?

That thought made the robed group anxious, but the demon continued in a matter-of-fact way. "Due to a promise I made to the alchemists, I've set a restraint on myself: Whenever I'm summoned, I will always give my summoner the knowledge they want. However...when someone gets in the way of my dream and ideals—my 'need for fulfillment,' if you will—I grow irritated."

"?"

Why was a demon talking about life? The robed group frowned, but that impassive voice went on.

"And so I won't save you for free. If there had been someone who seemed

interesting among you, I might have handled this differently, but... Well, never mind.”

“What are you talk—?”

Just then they heard an explosion, and the ship rocked violently.

“Wh-what was that?! What happened?!” The group’s leader sounded flustered.

“Melvi Dormентаire set you up,” the demon told him. “I imagine he doesn’t want a whole crowd of people possessing the knowledge of immortality. He tricked you into believing you had to summon me here, then created a device that would blow up the ship at a set time. An elaborate ploy, I must say.”

“M-Melvi?! Why?!”

“In other words, no matter what sort of knowledge you gain from me, you were always scheduled to go down with the ship,” the demon told them bluntly.

A stir ran through the robed group.

Before they could confirm any of this, a second explosion occurred, throwing the group on deck into a near panic.

“Now, do you want the knowledge that will save you from this situation?” the demon said. In a way, his words were very cruel; in another, they were quite merciful.

“Specifically, the knowledge of what you need to give me so that I’ll carry you safely to land. Knowledge of immortality would also save you, technically, but considering the currents in this area, you might end up spending eternity in the process of drowning... Well, never mind.”



A few minutes passed.

On the condition that the knowledge needed to summon him would be erased from their minds, Ronny had transported everyone on the ship to land. The next thing he knew, *he’d been summoned to another ship.*

“What now...? This time it’s right in the middle of the Pacific, hmm? ...Well, no

matter.”

When they heard him complain, the Japanese sailors who’d summoned him cried out.

“That voice... Have we actually summoned a noble *amabiko-nyudo*?!”

“W-we waited quite a long time. I didn’t think anything was going to show up...”

“Now I’m a *youkai*, am I?”

“Y-you aren’t one?!”

“No, that will do. Call me whatever you like. Nothing I’m called here matters anyway.”

Demon Ronny Schiatto, the “*amabiko-nyudo*,” decided to hear out these Japanese men. They probably didn’t know anything about the situation.

But in his heart, he suspected this was going to happen over and over, likely for roughly three days.

Telling the Japanese men the location of the treasure their ancestors had buried, Ronny smiled wryly to himself.

What an inventive way to keep me at bay.

Just how many people did he teach how to summon me?

He’s even taken care to stagger the times when it’s “possible” to summon me so that I’ll be summoned continuously.

If this happens again, it’s going to interfere with my work for the family.

He was already being kept out of the Ra’s Lance business, and he hadn’t been able to go off on his own and save Ennis, either. However, these “jobs” were based in a promise he’d made to his friend, and he couldn’t turn them down. Maiza and the others had already been informed that in cases like this (and only cases like this), he would temporarily step away from his work for the family. The Martillo Family men were trained thoroughly for this reason so that they wouldn’t have to rely on him in an emergency.

Still, if this was going to last for three whole days, even Ronny had to give it

some thought.

As the price for granting their wishes, should I make them forget how to summon me...?

Should I also make sure the Dormentaires won't carelessly spread stories of me around?

Granted, it's likely that only a handful of people will even believe in demon-summoning rituals after the next few decades, but...

Well, never mind.

And so he kept on granting wishes.

Sometimes as a demon.

Sometimes as a messenger of the gods.

Sometimes as an unknowable, malevolent nature spirit.

Sometimes as an embodiment of the collective unconscious lurking in the depths of all humanity.

People stated their various desires, and many wanted preposterous things.

Meanwhile, Ronny himself had only one wish: to end this farce as quickly as possible, then do his utmost as the Martillo Family's executive, Maiza Avaro's friend, and Firo Prochainezo's teacher.

That was his modest, one and only desire.

Chapter 24 Quiet Mornings Don't Suit Us

A shadow.

An enormous shadow covered in gray fur was barreling through the dark streets of New York City.

He'd heard an explosion, and his bed had tipped over sideways. Confused, the shadow had bolted.

Sometimes he swam through rivers and roamed aimlessly through the night in search of someone he knew.

Sometimes he heard screams go up around him, but the shadow took no interest in them.

After all, their voices sounded nothing like the "small people" he knew.

The little one called him Charlie and fed him every day.

The one who called him Cookie was a person with red hair who'd been showered with cheers and applause along with him.

Then there were the darker ones who followed the smaller figure around, calling him "young master."

He couldn't find them anywhere.

Strange territory, unknown landscapes.

The foreign shapes of skyscrapers surrounded the *shadow*. They frightened him, and he kept lumbering along, searching for somewhere peaceful.

Every so often, he caught the scent of food, but the small people nearby screamed and scrambled to get away.

Over the past few years, the shadow had learned that screams were bad, so he left those places and kept traveling through town, avoiding the sound.

Shortly before dawn, he saw a small person wrapped in gray fur leave a

building.

The shadow started to follow the gray figure, but then he caught the scent of dried meat drifting from the building. This was one of his favorite foods, and he stopped.

As the shadow slowly started toward the smell, he saw the door open and shut.

“Goddammit, Ladd... You and Graham keep slamming the doors, and now they’re all out of whack. At least they’re double doors, so I guess we only really need one of them to work...”

The voice belonged to a man dressed in white. The shadow didn’t understand what he was saying.

For his part, the man was focused on the doors, and he hadn’t noticed the shadow. He was about to lock up, but just then there was a heavy *thump*, and he saw a gray figure through the glass.

“Huh? Doc? Did you forget something?” the man said. His hand was on the doorknob, but he promptly realized that something wasn’t right.

The gray shape was much bigger than the doctor he knew.

“Wha—?”

He froze. In that instant, the thing pushed the door open—

—and when the man in white registered the enormous *shadow*, he passed out before he even had time to scream.



On the morning of the second day of the Ra’s Lance casino party, there was an odd uproar in New York.

Just the other day, the city had been subjected to an attack by strange airplanes. Now, before it had had a chance to recover, there had been a string of sightings of a monster.

A traffic accident had happened near the casino venue the previous night, and odd things had begun to occur immediately afterward.

Some said that when they woke that morning and went outside, they'd noticed a weird, wild smell hanging over the street.

Others said that a man with nowhere to go who'd bunked down on the side of the road had seen an enormous shape barreling down the street.

Still others said a black mass had been spotted swimming in the middle of the East River in the light of the morning sun.

That there were footprints on the riverbank that belonged to something far bigger than a human.

That they'd heard a monstrous roaring in the night.

Various rumors flew every whichway, but the updates stopped coming before the sun had fully risen, at which time the confusion died down. There hadn't been many witnesses to begin with, and nobody had the spare time to entertain themselves with theorizing when the Depression was making life miserable.

Some of them might have been suffering enough to think, *If there's a monster out there, I hope it destroys the world.* However, people like that definitely didn't have the time, money, or emotional energy to swap rumors.

On a street somewhere in Manhattan, though, there was a group of people who had little cash but plenty of emotional energy.

"Say, Miria. I just thought of something pretty amazing."

"Ooh, Isaac, that's amaaazing!"

"You think? It's all thanks to you, Miria!"

"Yay, I'm so glad! Thank you, Isaac!"

The couple's conversation seemed to be meshing, but it wasn't going anywhere. In fact, it hadn't even begun.

At first glance, Isaac and Miria appeared to be wandering through town without a plan, but they were currently working two jobs. Although the locals who often saw them around probably wouldn't have believed it, the pair was helping out at a clinic run by a doctor named Fred, and they were also helping the Martillo Family during the casino party at Ra's Lance.

It was an odd position to be in, working a public job during the day and an under-the-table gig by night, but nothing about their complicated situation showed in Miria's innocent voice. "Well, what is it? What amazing thing did you think up, Isaac?"

"Heh-heh-heh! Just wait till you hear this, Miria. I've thought up a no-fail way to win at gambling. A surefire method!"

"Wooooow!" Miria's eyes shone.

Isaac went on, sounding proud of himself. "Here's how it goes: First, let's say I bet a dollar, and I lose."

"You lost? I thought it was a surefire method to win."

"...You're right. It's a surefire method, but I lost. Miria, what's going on here?"

"Yes, it's a mystery! It's horror! It's suspense!"

Isaac muttered and mumbled for a little while. Then he clapped his hands together melodramatically. "I get it! I'll bet someone cheated! I must be gambling against a flimflammer!"

"Eek! He'll trick you!"

"Hey, it's all right, Miria. With my foolproof strategy, no matter how much I lose to a flimflam man, I'll have more lettuce than I know what to do with! I'll be able to buy back the Eiffel Tower, and we'll have a safe full of insurance money!"

"How keen! You're Victor Lustig! Thérèse Daurignac!"

Miria had given the names of a con man who'd sold the Eiffel Tower and a woman who'd launched a pension plan as part of an audacious fraud, but for some reason, Isaac blushed rather happily. Then he went on explaining his stratagem.

"Anyhow, after I lose that dollar, I'll bet two dollars. If I lose those, I'll bet four. If I do that ten times in a row, I've gotta win once, see? And if I do it a hundred times, what do you suppose my bet will be like?"

"Ummm... One, two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four, one twenty-eight, two fifty-six, five twelve, ten twenty-four, twenty forty-eight, forty

ninety-six... Oh no, Isaac! I lost track of what round I was on.”

“Don’t worry, Miria! So did I! Either way, I’ll pull out a win at some point! If I win on a thousand twenty-four, I’m scared to see just how far my winnings would outstrip my losses!”

“Hooray! Isaac, you’re riiich!”

The two were elated for a purely imaginary reason.

Unfortunately, today there was a man behind them ready to dash cold water on their fun.

“If the odds on that bet always double your money, you’ll only make a buck no matter what round you win on.”

“Huh?!”

Isaac and Miria turned around. Firo Prochainezo stood there, looking exhausted with them.

Having heard a rumor that the pair had been attacked by mystery thugs, Firo had met up with them, pretending it was coincidence, but he was hanging out with them to make sure nothing happened.

These two weren’t the only ones. Ever since Ennis had been snatched, the Martillo Family had been guarding their various connections, particularly Firo’s friends.

Since Isaac and Miria had already been attacked once, and it was also completely impossible to predict anything they did, Firo was guarding them personally.

He would really rather have been pounding the pavement looking for Ennis. Still, these two were his good friends, and he’d decided that clumsily searching for Ennis would be playing right into Melvi Dormентаire’s hands. As a result, he was guarding the pair in person until the casino party.

“And by the tenth round or so, you’d already have to bet 1,024 or 4,096 dollars. Do you have that kind of dough?” Firo asked.

Isaac hadn’t been completely off base. What he’d described was the martingale system, a supposedly foolproof strategy that was about as old as

gambling itself.

However, it had a lot of flaws. One was that, even though you kept doubling your bet, winning would only net you the small amount you'd bet first. Another was that you couldn't use the method when gambling with fluctuating odds. A third was that, if you bet your whole wallet and then lost, you'd lose everything without a chance to make it up again. Finally, if the casino had a set upper limit for bets at each table, you couldn't use it in the first place.

This surefire method wasn't viable unless conditions were perfect and you had the resources to place unlimited bets. On top of that, you couldn't win much with it. It was less a recipe for success and more a way for the wealthy to pressure an opponent with fewer resources, continuously doubling their bets as a type of psychological warfare.

Firo was well aware that Isaac and Miria were not equipped for psychological warfare, so he tried to nip this in the bud. However—

“We'll cover for that by, um, working and earning money! It'll be fine in the end!”

“If you can come up with four thousand bucks by working, you should just stick to the straight and narrow. Besides, even if you won that way, you'd only win a dollar, remember?”

“Meaning if we did that a thousand times, we'd walk off with a thousand dollars! What a haul!”

“Yes, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single inch! Rome wasn't built in a day!”

The pair were unrelentingly optimistic. Firo shrugged, unsure what to do with them anymore. “Well, that's really something. Fine, go on and build yourselves a magnificent Rome.”

Christ's sake... If the customers at my casino were fat cats this careless, I'd have it made.

Even though Isaac and Miria had been attacked just recently, they hadn't changed a bit. Firo found this rather heartening, but he still kept a cautious eye on their surroundings.

On the first day, neither Melvi Dormентаire nor the Runorata Family had tried to mess with him in any significant way.

Melvi had told him that their showdown would take place on the third day, but he couldn't afford to let his guard down.

Don't trust a word that guy says.

He said he'd let Ennis go if you won, but you really can't trust that one.

Firo scanned the road again, more cautiously this time. Flames were burning in his heart.

That said, they weren't the black flames of hatred.

The Martillo Family were his candles in the dark, blazing bright to show him the way.

He'd save Ennis and become his family's shield and sword as a camorrista.

He didn't yet know what the future would bring, but he knew the first road he needed to walk down, at least. That was why Firo was managing to respond to Isaac and Miria's conversation the way he usually did.

At this point, nobody knew how his composure would affect the big gamble.

However, his presence of mind wound up changing their immediate fate.



Fred's clinic

"Okay, I should be heading to work myse—"

Just as Firo safely dropped Isaac and Miria off at clinic, he sensed that something wasn't right. "...Hey, Isaac."

"What is it, Firo?"

"What's the matter?"

The couple looked perplexed. They didn't seem to have noticed anything strange about the clinic.

Wondering if his imagination was playing tricks on him, Firo frowned. "Who's usually in charge of locking up here?"

“The doc’s assistant, Mr. Who. Dr. Fred goes to lots of different hospitals in the morning, giving exams. He doesn’t show up until past ten, and since Who lives here, he’s the one who takes care of the patients until then. There aren’t any patients staying here now, though.”

“Yes, health is number one! Boil to sterilize!”

Fred, the doctor who ran the clinic, usually dressed from head to toe in gray. He looked like a suspicious character, but his skills were solid, and hospitals often asked him to help out with surgeries and the like. Firo had heard the same thing from Molsa Martillo, so although he hadn’t seen much of the doctor personally, he trusted him.

Apparently, the man was often away at other hospitals until his consultations began at ten; the clinic wasn’t open for business, yet the door was ajar. That was concerning.

“Look, the door’s half-open. Are they airing the place out or something?”

“Huh? Come to think of it, that’s odd. Who’s a pretty conscientious fella, and he gets mad at us if we leave the door open.”

“Oh, but he did say it hadn’t been closing too well since the fight, remember?”

“...I see.”

Maybe somebody had been bringing things inside, and they hadn’t closed the door.

Still, he couldn’t shake the sense that something was off.

Assuming something *was* wrong—had Melvi’s henchmen hit again? Were they lying in wait for Isaac and Miria?

No... If so, why leave the door like that? That makes no sense.

Was it a regular robber, drawn by the rations that were sent to relief facilities?

No.

Firo’s instincts nixed that theory, too.

A smell was tickling his nostrils.

The smell of an animal.

It was similar to what his nose picked up when he passed one of the city's mounted police officers on the horses they rode, but there was a slight difference. It was more like the smell of a dog. Something carnivorous.

Firo stepped past Isaac and Miria, heading into the clinic.

"What's the matter, Firo?"

"Are you sick or hurt or something? The doctor's not here yet."

"No, just a worrier." Slowly, Firo peeked through the door, just to spot a man lying on the floor in front of the reception desk. With a start, Firo warily stepped inside, then ran to the man and checked his pulse.

Apparently, he'd just passed out. Both his breathing and his pulse were normal.

As Firo exhaled in relief, Isaac and Miria came in.

"Huh?! Mr. Who's dead?!"

"He's fine. He's breathing."

"Oh. Well, good... Is he asleep?"

"Is it because it's been busy lately?"

"Maybe lugging in all that stuff wore him out."

Isaac and Miria seemed to have decided that the man was sleeping, not unconscious, and they looked simultaneously relieved and confused.

Firo turned to them. "Is work at the lodging house that rough?"

"I dunno. Is it a rough job? Is it hard on you, Miria?"

"Anything's fun if I'm with you, Isaac, so it's not a problem!"

"Yeah! It's a piece of cake if I'm with you, Miria!"

"Hooray! Thank you, Isaac!"

The pair were as noisy and boisterous as a couple of kids. Ignoring them, Firo

crouched, intending to wake the young man up.

That was when he noticed something—the man’s cheek and collar were wet. Not only that, but hairs of a brownish-gray sort of color were scattered over his clothes.

“Still, Who must’ve been really bushed to conk out on the floor like that.”

“Yes, ‘Sleeping Beauty’! ‘Young Slept-for-Three-Years’!” Miria said, giving the names of a famous fairy tale and a folktale she’d heard from Yaguruma. Suddenly, she spotted a mound of blankets in a corner of the clinic.

“Oh, say, Isaac! Do you think we’re supposed to take those blankets over today?”

“Huh? Wow, that many?!” Isaac followed her gaze to a messy pile of blankets that was taller than either of them. “It’s like a mini-mountain... If he got all this ready, no wonder Who’s so tired.”

He leaned back against the blankets, enjoying the fluffiness.

“Ooh! Isaac, that looks like fun! Let me do that, too!” Miria joined him, collapsing back into the pile with enough force that they bounced her right back up.

Isaac and Miria leaned back by turns, as if they were marking time.

Firo sighed. “C’mon, don’t mess around with the charity blankets. Help me get this guy to a bed, and—”

He broke off.

Something’s...

As Isaac and Miria bounced off it, the mountain of blankets was also rocking rhythmically.

That description sounded natural enough.

But it’s kinda shaking more than it’s supposed to.

The mountain was shifting slowly, and the movement was too significant to be caused by the couple’s motion. The blankets fell away one by one, revealing another huge blanket that was a color somewhere between gray and brown.

No, wait...

A...blanket...?

Firo felt apprehensive. As if responding to his misgivings, the mountain of blankets moved even more dramatically, knocking Isaac and Miria forward.

“Whoaaaagh?!”

“Eeeek?!”

Isaac and Miria tumbled over the floor, then looked at the blankets, wondering what was up.

They saw a mass of fur.

Unlike the blankets, the fur was covering a whole lot of fat and muscle. It also had four limbs and a face.

Firo, Isaac, and Miria all stared at it. Little round eyes shining, the enormous *thing* bolted to its feet, scraping its head on the ceiling—which was easily over nine feet high—and grunted.

“Gwuff?”

The giant grizzly’s quiet growl was summarily drowned out by screams from Isaac and Miria, and from Who, who’d just come to.

That was how the morning of the casino party’s second day began.

Melvi Dormentaire and Huey Laforet gave the impression they had their eyes fixed on the whole town, but easily surpassing their expectations, the day started with an encounter between an innocent beast and a camorrista.



The top floor of Ra’s Lance

Ra’s Lance was a combined commercial building, and its upper floors were a hotel that catered to the wealthy. The grand suite room was as spacious as a modest party venue, and you needed more than just money to stay there. Only the chosen were granted access to it.

The very first “chosen one” to stay in that room, a young boy named Carzelio Runorata, was gazing uneasily out the window. “I wonder if Charlie’s okay... Do

you think he's hungry?" he murmured.

Two voices responded from behind him.

"Don't worry, young Master Carzelio. Charlie's fine. He simply doesn't know the city, so he was startled. He's gotten rather lost."

"That's right. And we told the cops to handle it peacefully, so he's not gonna get hurt or anything."

"Not by the police anyway."

Carzelio—or "Cazze" for short—was an ordinary child in terms of looks and innocence, but his mind worked more quickly than those of others his age. And given the fact that he'd picked up a huge grizzly on a whim and kept him as a pet, he also seemed to have a screw or two loose.

"If he gets into a fight with some mafia people, they might shoot him or cut him open, right? What if he...dies...?"

Before that happened, the mafia would probably take a whole lot more damage. That was what Cazze's twin guards—Gabriel and Julian—were thinking, but they didn't say it. Instead, they tried to reassure their master, Bartolo Runorata's grandson.

"It's all right. We'll go look for him. Won't we, I?"

"Yeah, Me, that's right. If anyone tries to hurt Charlie, we'll do everything we can to stop them."

Stop their hearts, he meant, but he didn't actually say it.

Cazze was innocent and a little crazy, but he wasn't the type of person who enjoyed cruelty.

That was true now, of course. The twins were aware that his future environment could change his simple, ingenuous personality in any number of ways.

But they would not be the ones to change him.

They were quite particular about this, and they didn't speak with Carzelio any more than necessary. They left the room, preparing to get to work.

When they saw the dozen or so brawny men standing in a row out in the hall, the twins refocused on the situation.

“Do you think they’ll come, I?” Gabriel asked his brother, eyeing the heavy security.

“I dunno. If somebody did show, who would it be, Me?”

On paper, Carzelio was the guest of honor at this casino party, but he didn’t have any direct authority. That said, he was Bartolo’s biological grandson, and he had very few relations his age. On top of that, he was relatively popular with the family men. He’d have more than enough value as a hostage.

Even so, they couldn’t begin to guess which syndicate might go after him. There were too many possibilities. There were rival mafia families, of course, and an odd Camorra syndicate known as the Martillo Family was also involved. From what they heard, the group didn’t have any ties to the original Neapolitan Camorra, but they certainly weren’t an organization to take lightly. Despite being a small outfit, the twins couldn’t slack off on their job as bodyguards.

On top of that, there was Melvi Dormentaire, who’d been hired to help out. The man was ostensibly a collaborator who’d been sent by Huey Laforet’s organization. However, while the Runoratas had joined forces with Huey, they didn’t trust him enough to show him their backs.

In addition, the twins and other members with sharp instincts had picked up on the fact that Melvi had no significant loyalty to Huey. It would probably be better to focus on his connection to the Dormentaires, whose family name he shared. The House of Dormentaire had no official agreement with the Runorata family, and it was plenty likely that they’d try to use Carzelio.

A single glance was enough to show them they were surrounded by enemies.

They didn’t have time to worry about it, though. Not that there was any real reason to be worried anyway.

They were the Runorata Family.

Even if the whole world turned against them, they always had to go for their enemy’s throat first. They had to be the fangs sharp enough to tear open a jugular. The faithful dogs of the Runorata Family’s security team were filled with

that sort of insanity and camaraderie.

It wasn't just the twins, Gabriel and Juliano. All the members had that same grit.

Carzelio Runorata was innocently attended by these mad dogs.

He wouldn't show his true brilliance until quite a while later—but the boy's current growth hardly mattered. The men had compensated for his inexperience by building a solid fortress around him.

Those who really knew the Runoratas' strength understood the opposite as well: Any fighters who took a shot at them while knowing all this would have to be truly crazy themselves.

Even as their throats were ripped out, those guys would be on the alert for a chance to snap their enemies' necks.



Morning that same day Little Italy

In the basement of Coraggioso, the jazz hall that served as the Gandor Family's headquarters, Ladd Russo was in the middle of talking.

"And? Last night was boring as hell. When does the 'flash-bang-pow' stuff start?"

He wasn't being sarcastic; his expression was genuinely regretful of the lack of trouble.

Ladd had been hired as the Gandors' temporary bodyguard. He'd expected Thompsons to start squirting metal on the first day and was terribly unhappy that nothing exciting had happened.

Luck, the youngest of the three Gandor brothers, had grasped the man's character in the few days they'd known each other, and he responded in a matter-of-fact way. "I expect all the syndicates are still sizing one another up. They're gauging who their enemies are and who might be an ally. Plus, the Runoratas may be hosting the event, but there are feuds between organizations that have nothing to do with them."

"Well, yeah, I bet there are. Maybe they've got treaties, but that don't mean

they're gonna get along."

"Still, they'd prefer not to start a conflict and make trouble for themselves... Specifically, they don't want an enormous syndicate like the Runorata Family to realize there are rights and interests they want badly enough to start trouble over. No doubt that's why they stuck to watching and waiting, at least on the first day."

"There's an easy way to tell your friends from your enemies, y'know. Slug somebody with ties to the Runoratas. The fellas who cover your back are your friends, and the ones who try to shoot ya are your enemies."

The man seemed to be joking, but if Luck told him to do a crazy thing like that, he definitely would. He probably wouldn't even hesitate.

And if he did, Ladd could still very well be the last guy on his feet, smiling in the middle of a sea of corpses. In any case, Luck had no intention of giving that order. Frankly, in his position, he'd have to order him *not* to do it under any circumstances.

Granted, he was already prepared to turn his family's guns on the Runoratas if need be.

"Several organizations proposed alliances to us. Their reasons varied—some hoped to use us as sacrificial pawns to put a check on the Runoratas, while others flattered us, saying we should demolish the Martillos and run their territory ourselves."

"How about that! So who did you decide to team up with, amigo?" Maria Barcelito asked excitedly. She was a bodyguard who dual-wielded Japanese katana, and like Ladd, she was spoiling for a fight.

However, Luck shook his head, putting a damper on her enthusiasm. His eyes were cold. "I turned them all down. If we joined forces with them or gave them a hand, anything we gained as a result would become a liability. If this were business, I might consider it, but I won't accept any offers like that during a power struggle this uncertain."

"Ha! For a guy who hired me, you're pretty cautious." Ladd shrugged. Apparently, he thought rather highly of Luck, though, and he backed down

without arguing. “That Melvi gink and the ginger bastard never showed, though.”

“Even if you see them during the party, don’t *throw the first punch*, all right?” Luck put extra stress on those last words. Essentially, if the other party made the first move, there was no problem with striking back.

“Huh... Well, that’s a relief. Glad you didn’t tell me to suck it up and take whatever they dished out.”

“If I were going to be that careful, I wouldn’t have hired any of you to begin with. And we’ve fought the Runoratas before. I don’t know exactly how much clout Melvi has, but his position within the organization can’t be higher than Gustavo’s.”

“Hmm? Gustavo?”

Ladd’s eyebrows drew together, and Luck explained. “Ah, my apologies. Gustavo was a Runorata executive who once fought with us. I believe he’s still in prison.”

“Gustavo... Gustavo, huh?”

The name seemed to ring a bell for Ladd. He thought about it for a little while, but he couldn’t remember where he’d heard it. *Well, even if I did meet him, I guess he wasn’t anything to write home about*, he thought and decided not to worry about it.

As a matter of fact, Gustavo had declared himself the boss of the prisoners when Ladd was first incarcerated, and Ladd had absently punched him across the room. Since that was the extent of their relationship, it was one he could afford to forget.

“Well, I dunno about Gusty or whoever he was, but it’s good to know you’ve got the balls to pick fights with the Runoratas.”

Grinning, Ladd rubbed his prosthetic hand lightly.

I’m never gonna die, that redheaded monster had said. To *him*, of all people. Right to his face.

As Ladd fantasized about slamming his metal hand into him, he wore the sort

of hope-filled smile that young guys wore when they daydreamed about hitting the jackpot at poker.

Ladd wasn't the only one who was feeling this way, though.

Maria and many of the other killers the Gandors had hired had a bone to pick with a certain redheaded hitman who called himself Claire Stanfield, or Felix Walken, or Vino. They had gone to the casino ready to wager their own lives, harboring twisted ambitions of being superior to the legendary hired killer.

Luck—who was Claire's childhood friend and thought of him as a brother—understood this.

I can't see Claire losing to them—but never say never. No matter how bad the odds are, a bet is a bet. In that case, who's the banker in this ridiculous fight?

As a rule, bets among multiple people were made possible by a banker, who always profited. That was what let him keep his position.

No gambling den could ever—or should ever—be created by a banker who ran everything for free. His profits became a guarantee that ensured bets were truly fair.

That was how Luck saw it anyway.

Granted, Claire himself had once expressed a differing opinion. *"Really? I bet there are a few guys who'd do it for nothing. Maybe if they feel their mission in life is to weigh others' fates on the scales, or if they just like watching people gamble right up close. I guess you could say that emotional fulfillment is what they're getting out of it."*

If the profit weren't clearly visible, I don't think it would ultimately be worth trusting, Luck thought. *Well, I suppose Claire does have a point.*

In any case, Claire and the hitmen were betting their lives on this, and a banker-like figure who would ultimately profit might materialize.

His job was to circle around behind that banker, kick their throne over, and steal it.

On that thought, Luck began consciously breathing more slowly.

It was a quiet morning.

At the very least, he didn't sense any trouble in his immediate vicinity.

But with all these elements in place, there was no way nothing was happening.

Glancing over his shoulder at his brothers, Luck made himself focus.

No matter what happened, in the end, the three of them would have to get through it using their own strength and the strength of their family.

That meant they had to be on the alert for possibilities that hadn't even appeared yet. He scanned the group of hitmen, who were basically a mass of trouble, and visualized all the unpleasantness they could get pulled into. Even that wouldn't be nearly enough. He took a deep breath.

Somewhere in the city, something that would beggar his imagination was bound to be happening.



And indeed, Luck had never considered the situation that was currently unfolding.

It was directly connected not to him, though, but to his childhood friend Firo.

"H-hey, what are you doing? ...Isaac? Miria?"

The peculiar encounter that had occurred at the clinic was one that couldn't have happened under ordinary circumstances.

When the grizzly bear appeared out of nowhere, even Firo could hardly breathe, but he didn't panic or scream.

Well, worst-case scenario, Isaac, Miria, and I are all immortal, so a bear attack won't kill us. I need to hide this guy somewhere, though.

Firo pulled Who's limp frame over his shoulder and tried to get out of there, but Isaac and Miria were lying on the floor in front of him, hands clasped over their chests.

At the sight of the couple, the bear dropped back down to all fours, cocked its head, and started to sniff loudly.

"What do you mean, 'what,' Firo? We're dead! We're playing dead!"

“Yes, Mr. Yaguruma told us if we ran into a bear, we should either play dead or sneak into its den and jam a hand down its throat and suffocate it!”

Isaac and Miria were quite loud despite pretending to be corpses.

Play dead when you meet a bear.

Although this advice would later be called superstition, there was a reason it had spread the way it did. Several people across different countries reported to have survived bear attacks by being asleep or completely still.

However, those people had survived only because the bear had already killed prey and wasn't interested, or because, once it had killed its first prey, the bear had decided that whatever wasn't moving wasn't a threat. “Not riling up the bear” was the actually useful advice, and ultimately, the consensus was that it came down to luck.

Isaac and Miria didn't even know that, and they kept on giving the bear something new to be interested in.

“Uh, Miria? How can we pretend to be deader than this? How should we move?!”

“We're corpses, but we're moving? We'll basically be vampires, Isaac!”

“That's it! We're vampires! If we're moving corpses, it'll be easy to tell.”

“Yes, Bram Stoker! Sheridan Le Fanu!”

Naming the authors of vampire novels, Miria slowly got to her feet, pulled a blanket around her shoulders like a cape, and carefully sized up her opponent.

“B-but, Isaac, how should we pretend to be vampires?”

“Well, we could turn into bats...or, uh, drink blood...”

Isaac got to his feet, putting on a blanket cloak of his own, and timidly flapped its tails like bat wings.

When the bear saw that, it stopped moving again and snuffled more curiously.

“Okay, okay! Just...don't annoy the bear, you two!” Firo warned. He shoved the unconscious Who into a neighboring room and closed the door. Then he

drew his knife and started shouting, hoping to distract the gigantic animal. “Hey! Over here! Come and get me, bear!”

Okay, but what now?

If I let this thing outside, it'll cause a panic. Definitely can't kill it with a knife, though.

I'll just have to ask those two to call the cops...

Ah, dammit. What even happens to immortals who regenerate inside something's stomach?

Bracing for some uncomfortable time inside a bear, he yelled louder in an effort to get its attention, but—

“Huh...?”

—when he looked over, the bear had scooped up Isaac and Miria by the legs and tossed them onto its back.

“Whoa?!”

“Eeeeeek?!”

The pair landed on the dense fur, but they couldn't get their balance and tumbled to the floor again.

The grizzly cocked its head. Then it turned its back to Isaac and Miria, crouching as low as its joints would allow.

It almost seemed to be telling them to climb on.

“Was this bear somebody's pet...?”

A few minutes later, Isaac and Miria were shrieking and laughing up on the bear's back. Firo exhaled heavily with relief.

Groceries for the soup kitchen had been set in a corner of the room beside the blankets, and a few of the boxes that had held dried meat had been opened and ransacked.

“Did it run away? And then maybe the smell of all that jerky drew it here?”

He couldn't imagine what it had run away from, though. The circus or

something?

Come to think of it, he remembered seeing a tent in the plaza in front of Ra's Lance.

"What should we do with it, though...? The police? Are we just gonna have to call the cops?"

Fortunately, this bear was friendly, not a man-eater. Unfortunately, that didn't mean it wasn't dangerous.

"If it's from the circus... No, he's not an option right now."

He'd thought of a certain redheaded former circus performer, but they were technically enemies at the moment.

And just having circus experience didn't make him an animal tamer. Even if he'd asked, the guy might not have been able to help.

While Firo was trying to figure out what to do next, Isaac and Miria were having a great time up on the bear's back.

"This is incredible, Miria! We're actually riding a bear!"

"Hooray! Isaac, you're so cool!"

"I've heard of this... There's this place called Ashigara Mountain, and they say your skill in riding a bear on the mountain determines whether you'll make a success of yourself. If you make it big, you're a feudal lord. That means you can do all the sumo wrestling you want, you get to practice with bears, and you can even become a *yokozuna*!"

"Yes, a god incarnate! A thunderbolt!"

Yaguruma again, huh?

Firo had no idea what the two of them were saying, but if they were using words like *yokozuna*, he assumed one of his family's top executives, an Asian man by the name of Yaguruma, had taught Isaac and Miria this stuff for fun.

I'm pretty sure they have the wrong idea about a lot of it, but...I think Yaguruma probably enjoys that part, too.

Firo smiled sheepishly; the old man could be a real kid sometimes. As he

watched them, Isaac and Miria went on with their conversation.

“Let’s see. I think there was a Kintarou song, too. ‘High and low, low, high, low, low’... Isn’t that how it went?”

“Yes, it’s hi-lo gambling!”

“This means we’ll be able to win our bets today!”

“Yaaaay! It’s all thanks to Mr. Bear!”

Isaac and Miria had been screaming a minute ago, but as soon as they realized the bear was friendly, their terror had vanished as if someone had flipped a switch.

That’s definitely one of their talents, huh?

Come to think of it, they were always at home around us Camorra, too.

While Isaac and Miria squealed and cheered, the bear somehow seemed to be in high spirits, too. Or was it his imagination?

That said, we got lucky in several ways here.

He and the other two were only calm because they were immortals. If an ordinary person stopped by, they’d have a huge panic on their hands whether the bear looked happy or not. Even so, Firo was grateful their good luck had gotten them through this accidental bear encounter.

Oh, what was that Japanese word? That one Yaguruma likes to use.

After giving it a little thought, he remembered, and he gave a wry smile.

“For now...maybe this’ll turn out to be one of those things. *Genkatsugi*. Hope it brings us luck.”



Chapter 25 No Use for Small-Time Crooks

That same morning Millionaires' Row

"I see, yes, all that makes sense... Get out."

The woman who'd introduced herself as Pamela was sitting at a table with Nader Schasschule when she delivered her point-blank reply.

"No, uh, miss? This isn't your house, you know," said Rail, a kid with a scarred-up face.

Behind Rail, another child—Czeslaw Meyer—was watching Nader and Pamela closely.

They were currently in the Genoard family's second residence, the house Jacuzzi's group was using as their base of operations.

Jacuzzi and the other delinquents were still asleep, so Rail had smuggled Czes, Nader, and Pamela into a basement that was being used as a storeroom.

The previous night, Nader had noticed Pamela behaving suspiciously during the casino party, so he had struck up a conversation with her. He'd hoped to form an alliance, but just then, Leeza and Chané had attacked.

Rail and Czes had rescued him just in time, and all four of them had fled.

The smoke screen they'd used in the process had caused a traffic accident. A truck had tipped over, and an enormous grizzly had escaped...but none of them knew about that yet.

Czes and Rail had been avoiding questions about themselves. All they'd told the two adults was that they were fighting against "all those birds, aka Leeza."

Something about that statement seemed to have relieved Nader. He'd relaxed noticeably, and then, in fits and starts, he'd begun to tell them about himself.

Not that he'd done so voluntarily. It was more that Czes, Rail, and Pamela had kept asking questions and pried it out of him.

When they heard that Leeza and Chané were after him because he'd sold Huey out way back when, everything seemed to make sense to Rail and Czes. After that, they'd lost interest. However...

Although she was only here because she'd been dragged into this mess, Pamela apparently felt more of a connection to Nader than the children did. She kept up her questions until he'd told her everything from the time he'd left his small town up to the present.

Then, once she'd heard all of it, she'd drawn a deep breath and told him to get out.

Giving the silent Nader a sidelong glance, Pamela turned to Rail. "You're right; I'm sorry if that came out wrong. I didn't mean he should leave the house. I mean, if you tell me to go, I'll get out, too...but that good-for-nothing needs to get out of town."

That was even harsher than running him out of the house, but Nader couldn't argue with her.

He did say something, though. "Listen...ma'am. You said your name was Pamela?"

"Yes."

"So you know Sonia."

"...Yes."

Sonia was Nader's childhood friend, a girl raised in an odd family that worshipped guns.

He'd understood that Pamela was an acquaintance of hers, but he didn't know any of the details. She'd only told him that they traveled together.

"Tell me about yourself. Then I'll talk."

Nader had fulfilled his end of the bargain, but he hadn't heard anything about Pamela and Sonia's relationship yet.

“Well, uh...since you know her, I bet you don’t want her meeting me.”

“...You’ve got that right.”

“Is it because I’m the scum of the earth?”

“I wouldn’t say you’re the worst in the world. From what you said, it sounds like you’ve clawed your way out of that situation, so... At best, you’re a small-time crook.”

As he’d related his life story, Nader had become filled with self-loathing. He’d recognized his own depravity many times before, but personally talking about his life had forced him to see that he really had wasted his life.

“You’re not going to argue that?”

“Well...no. If you’re Sonia’s friend, you wouldn’t want her meeting a small-time crook like me. I get that.”

“No matter what sort of lowlife you are, I can’t throw stones. I’m a small-timer myself: I went from breaking casinos to committing petty robberies, and I can’t claim I’ve been a good influence on Sonia. In fact, I wouldn’t blame you if you wanted to punch me.”

Pamela gave a brief self-deprecating smile. Then, across the table from Nader, her expression turned serious. “But if you’re still... If you’re going to keep on being a small-time crook, then I’m sorry, but I don’t want Sonia seeing you. If it were anybody else, I wouldn’t care. But, Nader Schasschule...as long as you’re a crook, you’re the last person I want her to see.”

“.....”

“The thing is, she believes in you. She believes that whatever danger she’s in, you’re the hero who’ll come and save her. She thinks you’ll come galloping back into her life on a white horse... Actually, just for my own curiosity, is that all Sonia projecting her hopes onto you? Or was it...?”

Nader shook his head. “No, it’s not just her. I really did...say that to her. To Sonia.”

Tears at his own wretchedness threatened to spill over, but he went on. He told her about a promise he probably wouldn’t even have remembered when

he was Huey's underling.

"I told her I'd be a hero."

"When I grow up, I'm gonna be a hero!"

"Like the ones in the history books."

"Yeah, like Wyatt Earp or Jesse James!"

"I said I'd get stronger..."

"Just you watch—I'll get super strong!"

"And then, I'd protect...Sonia..."

"And then, hey... I could protect you, too, if you want."

He could remember that memory clearly now, although there was a time when he'd forgotten it.

The promise he'd made when he was still a boy.

As a child, he'd made that pledge to a girl who was even younger than he was.

The girl, his neighbor, had adored him for it.

Before then, she'd never showed much interest in the world around her. But she'd broken into an ingenuous smile and replied in a voice that didn't hold a trace of doubt:

"That's a promise, Nader!"

He could vividly remember how Sonia had looked as she'd said it. He could almost hear her voice in his ears now.

"Yeah... I...promised. I promised Sonia." Nader faltered, squeezing his hands into fists.

When Pamela saw how mortified he was, her opinion of him rose ever so slightly. Still, thinking of Sonia, she spoke harshly to him. "Sonia is... She's kind. I'm sure she'd forgive you for your crimes, but I think she'd keep naively believing you'd turn into a hero at some point. Can you live up to her expectations?"

"..."

Unintentionally, Pamela's voice was growing more intense.

The words that had built up in her heart, everything she'd always imagined herself saying to him whenever she heard Sonia talk about him, just flowed out of her.

"She's been going on and on about you all this time. When we had the mafia on our tails, and when we were surrounded by the cops, and when we got into an accident and the truck tipped over, she'd say, 'It's okay. Nader's going to save us.' That kid believed in you. She never doubted you for a minute. You never did show up and save her, not even once, but she still believes in you. Can you imagine it? Even after a mafia bullet went right past her head!"

"..."

"Can you be worthy of that? Can you handle her genuine thoughts, her wishes—her worship of you? Can you make her happy in the truest sense of the word, not just a superficial one?"

"I..."

He wanted to say he could.

But Nader knew better than anyone that he couldn't.

"If she said any of that to me, I'd probably use it as a crutch. I'd tell myself, 'I'll be a hero starting tomorrow. I'll be a hero the day after tomorrow. Or next week, or next year...' And all the while, I'd probably...keep on betraying her. Yeah—yeah, I sure as hell would! Dammit! *That's the kind of guy I am!*"

"...In that case, I really can't let you see her. I'd like to let her keep hoping that you're being a hero somewhere. I don't want to lie, but if she walked in and saw you right now, I don't think it would do either of you any good."

"Yeah. I couldn't agree with you more. Frankly, I wouldn't even know how to face her." Nader rested his fists on the table and stared at them sadly. "Tell me," he said. "Is... Is Sonia doing well?"

"She's just fine. I guarantee that."

"She's pretty close to twenty now, isn't she? I bet she's gotten taller, huh?"

"No, not that tall... In most ways, she's still a kid. She could probably pass for

fifteen. She's never been a real active type."

Pamela remembered she'd underestimated the girl's actual age by three or four years when they'd first met. She felt as if Nader and Sonia would probably look more like siblings than childhood friends.

"Is that right...? Well, she always was kind of a kid. You seem a lot more capable than I am, so if she's with you, I guess I won't worry." Nader gave a sad little smile.

Watching him, Pamela felt a growing urge to turn and run. "Cut that out. I've caused trouble for her, too. If anything, she's constantly saving me."

"?"

"When we were just starting out, my partner and I pulled petty heists and beat casinos. When the cops or the mafia came after us, Sonia ran them off with her rifle. Remember what I said earlier? I'm a small-time crook, just like you."

"Sonia did that? With a rifle?" Nader's eyebrows drew together, but not because he couldn't picture it.

The neighbors' house had been far away, on the other side of their farm fields, but he'd heard muffled explosions over there every night.

Gunshots in the forest that didn't sound like they were from hunters.

His childhood friend returning from the forest with her parents afterward.

He'd felt all along that something wasn't quite right.

Nader's father had told him, "Maybe you shouldn't have too much to do with them," but the boy hadn't understood what he really meant.

Just as Sonia didn't know what he was like now, he didn't know what she'd been like back then. Suddenly very conscious of that, he looked at Pamela again. "Listen, is Sonia...okay? You're not still pulling heists, are you?"

"...We've mostly turned over a new leaf. Granted, we might get yanked into something ugly, but we'll handle that ourselves."

"But..."

“It’s selfish of me, but I want you to believe that. Sonia’s important to me, too.”

Pamela wasn’t lying.

She and the others were employed at Senator Beriam’s mansion as cleaning ladies, but what Beriam really wanted was Sonia’s skill as a sniper. The girl was practically a gun herself. He’d put her under the instruction of a man called Spike, and he intended to make her shoot something on the final day of the casino party—in other words, the following day.

The identity of that “something” hadn’t been settled yet.

Beriam was probably planning to judge who among the mafia was in his way within the next day or two.

Pamela didn’t want Sonia to kill anybody. She knew it was a selfish thing to think, given that she’d roped the girl into wandering around committing robberies. She knew that, but it was a line she didn’t want to cross.

If it came down to it, she’d grab her friend and run.

To get the money to do that, Pamela had used her particular skills on the first day of the casino party to win chips.

If this guy saw what I was doing, though, I’ve gotten rusty.

“If I’m planning to really turn over a new leaf, my final job will be to head into that trouble, lift any valuables, and make myself scarce. The getaway will probably burn through most of it, but still.”

“This ‘trouble’ has something to do with the casino party, right?”

“...” Nader was a crook, but he wasn’t dumb. She’d gleaned that much from hearing his life story.

Would it be better to give him some basic information about her situation? Otherwise, he might get suspicious and stick his oar in.

Pamela hesitated. Nader watched her face.

For a little while, silence fell between the two of them. Rail, who’d been listening to their conversation as if it was somebody else’s problem, was the

one who ended up pulling the conversation in another direction.

“Hey. You keep calling yourself a ‘small-time crook’ and ‘scum’ and running yourself down, but I think selling the Lemures out was pretty impressive, mister.”

“Huh?”

“If you’re looking at Huey’s subordinates who were still basically human, you had some of his best running that team. You had Huey’s right-hand man, Goose; Chané the fanatic; and Spike, a crack sniper... Although I do hear there were signs of trouble. If you’d actually pulled off that betrayal, now *that* might have made you a hero.”

Rail snickered, but instead of Nader, Pamela responded. She’d been caught completely off guard.

“Spike...a crack sniper?”

“? You know him, Miss Pamela?”

“How do you—? Actually, Nader, when you were talking about selling them out—you said something about doing it in parallel with a plot to take a train hostage. Do you remember when exactly that was?”

“Huh? Well, that’s the day I almost died, so yeah. It was 1931, the end of the year... Hey, never mind that. You know that bastard Spike?”

“.....!”

Inside Pamela’s mind, pieces were rapidly clicking into place.

Spike’s terrible injuries when they’d found him lying beside the railroad tracks on New Year’s Eve, 1931.

The destruction of a group of terrorists called the Lemures.

And “Spike, the crack sniper” that Rail had just mentioned.

There was no telling why this kid knew so much about the inner workings of a terrorist group, but from Nader’s reaction, that had been accurate.

Was the guy we saved a terrorist who attacked a train?

Why is somebody like that working for Senator Beriam?

Even as the pieces came together, new questions came to take their place.

But before she could figure out the answers, Nader rose from his chair, staring at her desperately. “You know Spike?! You said something about Sonia and rifles; did you mean—? Is he somewhere near her?!”

“...”

Nader took her silence as a yes.

“Dammit! I’d heard all those black suits died! It wasn’t just Chané and Upham?! That bastard lived, too?!”

“Guessing you didn’t get along...”

“Of course we didn’t! I know I got no right to say this as the one who sold them out, but that guy will believe in whatever you want if there’s money involved! He was the one who was the most on board with my betrayal, but he was secretly weighing me against Goose!”

Nader seemed to be remembering what had happened. For a moment, anger flared in his eyes, but it was promptly replaced by anxiety.

“Look, did Spike get something on Sonia?! Is he threatening her? Who’s he working under now? Is he still with the Lemures?!” he asked.

Pamela was frustrated with herself for letting him see she was flustered, but she gave up on the idea of hiding their situation from him.

Even so, if she was going to talk about it, she had to steel herself.

She knew it was going to make Nader lose all hope.

Pamela might have been a crook, but this man was Sonia’s old friend. She wasn’t callous enough to tear his heart open just because he was a stranger to her.

“...Spike hasn’t harmed Sonia. Actually, they’re pretty friendly. He’s basically her sniping instructor.”

“Hey... Wait just a minute. ‘Sniping’?”

“Sonia hasn’t shot anybody yet. That may not be true after tomorrow, though. Depending on how things look at the casino party then, it sounds like

our employer might make her shoot something...or maybe somebody.”

“So who’s this employer?! Is it Huey Laforet?! The Runorata Family? If it’s a much smaller outfit, I might be able to shut this down! It’s not a sure thing, but I’ve got connections!”

Remembering Ladd, Nader grilled Pamela about her employer’s identity, but the answer he got was far beyond anything he’d imagined.

“He’s a senator.”

“Huh?”

“Senator Manfred Beriam. You know him, right?”

“W-well, of course...”

Nader had originally been a member of the Lemures. When he’d tried to sell them out, he’d been scheduled to attack the train as one of the black suits and take a politician’s family hostage. That politician had been none other than Senator Manfred Beriam.

“Hold the phone... When I told the cops about them, that name came up quite a bit, too... No, that can’t be right. Spike was supposed to take that guy’s family hostage, so... Huh?”

“Spike would flip for money, wouldn’t he? That’s what you said.”

“...!”

The shock had left Nader bewildered—but Pamela hit him with cold, hard facts.

“Meaning if you screw up, it won’t just be terrorists or the mafia you’re dealing with. You’ll have an enemy in one of the most important people in the U.S. Maybe the country itself will be against you.”

His enemy was the nation.

He was struck by the feeling that he’d reverted to being one of Huey’s terrorists, but then something occurred to him:

His situation had been a lot more hopeful then.

Right now, he had no allies who could back him up with brute force.

If he made trouble, he'd end up fighting America all by himself.



Meanwhile At the Beriam residence

“Pamela never did come home, huh?”

As she cleaned her guns, Sonia looked out the window.

Lana shrugged, busy tidying up the room. “I swear, staying out all night... Must be nice to be her! I bet she drank the night away at a bar somewhere!” She sounded disgusted, but behind her glasses, her eyes were vaguely uneasy.

After all, Pamela had gone to the casino at Ra’s Lance to cheat. Lana believed in her skills, but if someone had managed to catch her at it, she could easily be on the bottom of the East River.

Sonia seemed to have picked up on her worry. She smiled innocently, although she didn’t stop working. “It’s okay, Lana. I’m sure Pamela’s just fine.”

“...Why?”

“Because Nader’s bound to save her.”

“Haaah... Nader again? You think he’d save Pamela when she was just passing through? How convenient is this hero, huh? If he’s saving everybody in the world, he’ll never get a break.”

It’s about time Sonia quit relying on Nader, Lana thought. From what the girl had said, she could only assume that her brain was running on autopilot. However, Sonia’s next words quickly contradicted that assumption.

“Right, so I’m going to do my best, too.”

“Huh?”

“If Nader’s a hero now, he’s probably got it rough. He’s nice, so I bet he’s trying to save all sorts of people. He won’t have any time to rest.”

With a smile that suited her innocent assertion, Sonia held her deadly, perfectly maintained rifle. “So I’ll help him, you see?” she murmured, more to herself than to Lana. “I’ll help lots and lots!”

Her final remark sounded a bit wistful.

“And then...I hope Nader tells me I did good.”



Meanwhile Millionaires' Row

“...It sounds like you two are in a pretty complicated situation.”

Czeslaw Meyer had stuck to watching at first, but now that Pamela and Nader had fallen silent, he spoke. “And? What are you going to do now?”

Czeslaw maintained his innocent child act as he probed the pair, trying to learn what their next move would be. Privately, he was thinking like an immortal who'd lived more than two centuries.

This is getting strange. Who'd have thought that train would be connected to this as well...

Who does Senator Beriam intend to have this girl Sonia shoot? What should I do? Should I pass this information on to Maiza and Firo?

No, it won't necessarily help us rescue Ennis. It might just muddy the waters. Maybe I'll watch and wait a little while longer...

Keeping his calculations to himself, Czes observed the pair.

“...Right. Actually, there was something I wanted to ask. Where are we? Whose house is this? Unless my mind's playing tricks on me, I'm pretty sure we're smack in the middle of Millionaires' Row...”

“It's a second home that belongs to the Genoard family; they're rich. Due to circumstances I won't get into now, Rail is apparently mooching off them.”

“Mooching? Aw, come on... Well, I guess you're not wrong.” Rail shrugged.

Nader's eyebrows drew together. “Genoard? Genoard... As in Eve Genoard?”

“Oh, that's right. You said you were Miss Genoard's proxy gambler, didn't you? That's another odd coincidence... For now, are you sure you don't need to contact Miss Eve?”

“...Maybe I should. Still, if this is the Genoards' second residence, mind if I stay here as well?” Nader looked around. He probably wanted a base where he could hide from Leeza and Chané.

Czes shook his head regretfully. “Just so you know, Chané comes here, too, sometimes.”

“Wha...?!”

“Chané is friends with the delinquents who are staying here.”

Which is why I'd really rather not stay here too long myself... The face of a red-haired man rose in Czes's mind. *Mgh... I'll head back to Alveare as soon as I can.*

He'd told Firo that Rail had invited him to stay over, so he'd be spending the night with Jacuzzi and the others. Firo had agreed readily, apparently deciding there was safety in numbers.

That said, the Martillo Family was keeping an eye on this house as well. Slipping out and smuggling Nader and Pamela back in hadn't been easy.

Hearing Chané's name had clearly rattled Nader, and his eyes darted around nervously. “I—I see... I'll get myself back to the lodging house somehow, then. I'll have to disguise myself so Leeza won't find me...”

“Unless you put a lot of effort into that disguise, Leeza will see right through it. I'd be careful,” Rail commented.

Nader flinched, but he took false whiskers, glasses, and cotton wadding out of his jacket and started to plan his costume.

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

“Agh?!”

A shriek escaped Nader.

Then the individual outside the door spoke, and with a surge of relief, he realized the voice was male.

“Heya. How's it going? Are Nader and Pamela awake?”

“Oh, Shaft. It's okay; you can come in,” Czes called.

The door opened, and a man Nader recognized stuck his head in.

The man's name was Shaft, and he was a friend of Graham Specter, Ladd's sworn brother. He'd also helped Nader and Pamela escape under cover of that smoke screen earlier.

“It’s you, huh...?”

From what he’d heard, when they reached the mansion, the guy had distracted Czes’s friends who were on guard duty and then headed straight home.

“Yes, Nader. Glad to see you’re doing well.”

“Y-yeah. I’m not doing so great mentally, though.”

“Well, that’s not good. If your nerves are already shot, you won’t last to the evening.”

“?”

That was an odd thing to say. Nader cocked his head, perplexed, and the other man quickly clarified.

“Graham and Ladd are calling. So, um...my condolences.”

“Wh-why...?”

“Who knows? There’s no telling what goes on in their minds. Oh, but there’s one thing I can tell you.”

Gazing at Nader with pity in his eyes, Shaft said something intended to give him a little peace of mind.

“If you’re with those two, they’ll probably beat back both Chané and Leeza for you, whether you ask them to or not.”

Shaft nodded confidently. Then, averting his eyes, he added one more unnecessary comment.

“Although I think you’re more likely to get dragged into some other fight and killed...”



Meanwhile Somewhere in New York Fred’s clinic

“No, no, no, c’mon... Are you kidding me with this?” The bespectacled man was grinding his teeth.

Firo shrugged. “What’s the matter? Your two-bit goon face is looking even cheaper than usual. You ain’t scared, are ya?”

“What is wrong with you?! You— This is— What the *fuck* is wrong with you?! What am I supposed to do about this?!” the man—Victor Talbot—howled angrily. He was staring at the enormous grizzly that was snoozing peacefully in the clinic’s reception corner, with several blankets draped over it.

Isaac and Miria were leaning against the bear’s side, fast asleep. Fred, the clinic’s owner, and a pale-faced Who were standing a short distance away, keeping an eye on them.

“For goodness’ sake... Animals aren’t exactly hygienic. We’ll have to sweep up the hair later.”

“D-Doc, now’s not the time to be saying that! Are you okay with this?!”

“I’d be quieter, if I were you. Relax. If this bear genuinely wants to kill us, one swipe of its claws would be enough to knock off our heads. We’d likely be dead before we had time to feel any pain.”

“How the hell’s that supposed to help me relax?!”

Fred had hung out the CLOSED TODAY sign. At the moment, only a handful of people were inside the clinic: Firo and several Division of Investigation men, the head of the clinic and his assistant Who, plus Isaac and Miria.

If the surrounding residents found out about the bear, they’d have a panic on their hands. Victor’s men had made up a likely sounding reason and cleared the area so that no one would notice it.

“First you call my department out of nowhere, then you tell me to find the owner of this huge goddamn grizzly?! What the hell, Firo Prochainezo?!”

“What was I supposed to do? You’re the only ones I know who might be able to get this sorted out. Oh, and I think it’s used to people, so if you shoot it or poison it or something, the owner’s probably gonna come after ya.”

“Thanks for that extra headache! Aha—I see your game! You’re planning to yank us around with this shit, then charge into the Runorata Family with a bomb under your jacket while we’re distracted.”

“Don’t say that.” Firo gave a little sigh, then went on indifferently. “That’s a last resort.”

“...”

Not only was it a very real possibility, it was a tactic an immortal could use as many times as he wanted.

Victor had taken an attack from something very similar to a suicide bomber before, and he gave Firo a sour-faced glare. “So? Is this your revenge for Alcatraz?”

“No, only half of it was to ruin your day.”

“You little— What about the other half?”

“Is Edward doing okay?” Firo asked, giving the name of a policeman he’d always been on bad terms with. The guy had joined the Division of Investigation, and apparently, Melvi Dormентаire had attacked him just because he knew Firo.

“You do get whose fault it is that he got hurt, right?”

“Just ‘hurt’? So it’s not too bad, then. That’s one consolation, I guess.”

“...Huh. Trying to win some points by acting worried?”

“I am worried. He’s the only one who could actually arrest you once you turn dirty.” After that offhand response, Firo narrowed his eyes. “That’s about half of the second half of the reason I called you. The rest of it is an easy question—are you friendly with the House of Dormентаire?”

“Did Maiza tell you that? ...Well, I knew ‘em a long time ago. I doubt any of them are still alive.”

At the name “Dormентаire,” Victor tipped his head back, reminiscing. Then, as if something had occurred to him, he shot Firo a hard glare. “Hold it. You don’t need Maiza to tell you this stuff. You’ve got that old bastard Szilard’s memories. Wouldn’t it be faster to just haul those out?”

“What I want to know about is what they’re up to now. The last few years.”

“And you want the Division of Investigation to be your errand boys?”

“I’m not lookin’ for an alliance. I’m asking you...as an immortal. That’s all.”

Victor grimaced. Then his face went blank. “Those people should have come

way down in the world. But they took the fortune they'd accrued through maritime trade and spread it all over the world. They've got tons and tons of resources squirrelled away. It was a tax evasion scheme to end all tax evasion schemes, conducted over a century or two."

"Yeah, there were several big money streams between them and Szilard. It looks like they were buying rare materials to create a homunculus."

"..."

Firo's expression didn't change, but Victor didn't miss the surge of emotion in his eyes as he said the word *homunculus*.

This was an opportunity to put Firo in his debt, and Victor planned to capitalize on it. "This isn't confirmed, but we can guess where Ennis is."

"...Out on the ocean?"

"Wha—?"

Firo said the answer before he could get to it, and Victor's mouth dropped open.

"We're not dumb. We can pull in decent information and draw conclusions. If it was confirmed, you'd be sitting on a scoop even the *Daily Days* doesn't have yet."

"You're a little shit, you know that?"

And? How are you going to save her? Victor considered asking the question aloud, but he kept his mouth shut for two reasons.

The first was that he had a hunch he wouldn't get a solid answer.

The second was that one of his men called to him just then. "Uh... Assistant Director? Got a minute?"

"What's up?" He turned to Bill Sullivan.

The man scratched at his cheek. From his face, this was obviously nothing good.

"I recognize that bear," Bill said.

"You what?" Firo looked up, too.

“Well, this fella here is, uh... He’s a grizzly that lives at Bartolo Runorata’s mansion. I hear his grandkid Carzelio is taking care of him.”

Then fate began to turn again—completely ignoring the wills of the immortals and the underworld syndicates, set in motion by an encounter between two different species.

Chapter 26 Of Course They're Not Behaving

The Runorata villa

Melvi had stopped by the Runorata villa in the suburbs of New York when Carlotta, the family's former main dealer, called to him. "You'll be attending to the party tonight, won't you? I'm told you left things to random dealers and wandered off yesterday."

"Yes, because that was just the day when everyone was sizing up the situation. I didn't want to tip my hand if I didn't have to."

"Tip it to whom?"

"Anyone. Everyone. Including you. Unless Mr. Bartolo ordered it," Melvi said casually, attempting to throw her off-balance.

Carlotta fixed him with a cold gaze. "I don't know what you're really after, and I don't care, but if you plan to use the Runoratas, I wish you'd compensate us. I don't have the authority to force you, so it's just a request."

"Don't worry; I'll be there in person tonight. I have to prepare for tomorrow anyway... I do intend to turn a profit for the family."

"...I see."

Carlotta gazed at Melvi Dormентаire through narrowed eyes for a few seconds. Then she exhaled heavily. "I can't imagine the boss selected you because he wanted the casino to be profitable, so I have no expectations to speak of there."

"My, my. Are you implying that you could have generated greater profit?"

"Yes, there's no question about that."

"...All I'm hearing is sour grapes, Carlotta." Melvi smirked, and Carlotta's face went blank.

“Let me repeat my warning, just one more time.”

“.....”

“Own your own greed. An arbitrator who has none isn’t fit to be either a dealer or a made man.”

The former head dealer left without another word. Once he’d watched her go, Melvi gave a scornful snort. “What greed? Ridiculous.”

Well... It’s true that I’m not suited to be an arbitrator or a mafioso.

I’m destined for the heights of Szilard Quates himself.

Yes, in that sense, I do have desires.

What I want is to take the people who block my path—to take Firo Prochainezo—and make him taste despair.

Melvi reaffirmed the dark, stagnant hatred in his depths.

He seemed to be telling himself that the hatred was his desire.



Ennis—who had been kidnapped by Melvi Dormentaire’s henchmen and was currently being held prisoner—had decided to review her situation as closely as possible.

She’d been blindfolded while they transported her from the warehouse in New York, but she understood her situation to some extent. Although the room seemed like a hotel guest room, the slow rocking motion she felt every so often told her that she was probably out on the ocean, on a midsize vessel.

During his one-sided chat with her, Melvi had said he was going to end everything at the casino party. If he was going to settle things with Firo, he wouldn’t be anywhere near here when he did it.

He’d told her the person who’d been kidnapped with her would die if she tried to run, but was that true? If so, wouldn’t it have been better to keep her on land, where he’d hear right away if she did escape?

She was suspicious, but she couldn’t do anything risky without being sure.

But..., Ennis thought.

Was it all right to just stay here?

Could she let herself be a captive doll?

Was it okay to keep causing trouble for Firo, Czes, and the Martillos?

Back when she'd worked for Szilard, that thought probably wouldn't even have occurred to her. She would have just considered herself useless. She would have known Szilard would abandon her.

Things were different now, though.

Firo Prochainezo belonged to a criminal organization, and yet...he was a very kind person.

Ennis hadn't noticed that that kindness was focused on her with particular intensity. What she did know was that Firo had given her a place to belong when she'd had nowhere to go. That gesture had touched her heart and been a support to her.

Why was Firo so kind? Because he was strong.

He wasn't the only one. The Martillos, and Isaac and Miria, had all accepted a being like her. That tolerance was strength, plain and simple. To Ennis, this was clear.

The people around her were magnanimous. They didn't just accept the other by yielding to it. They made sure their own selfish requests were heard—and even then drew the other into their circle. They had that sort of strength.

She couldn't tarnish that strength with her own spinelessness. She couldn't let their smiles be clouded.

That was why Ennis made up her mind. Her resolution was extremely simple: She would do everything she could. She'd mobilize all the "knowledge" she'd been avoiding.

The knowledge she'd been given by Szilard Quates, accumulated at the expense of others' lives.



Somewhere in New York The Runorata villa

Huey Laforet, who'd broken out of jail, was currently a guest at the Runorata Family's villa.

Since his escape hadn't been publicly disclosed, Victor's men couldn't charge in to get him. The only interference from the machinery of the state came in the form of observers stationed around the villa at a distance.

In Huey's guest room, Salomé Carpenter—the leader of Rhythm, a group in charge of developing technology—was speaking enthusiastically.

"That's right! Knowledge certainly is important. However, I am against complete dependence on the knowledge the immortals possess—your own first and foremost, Master Huey."

"And why is that?" Huey asked mildly.

Flushing, Salomé went on. "Knowledge is necessary for progress, but the older the knowledge, the more mistakes it has. Even if it is accurate, it is more likely to include inefficient methods. From time to time, it may become a shackle that hinders new discoveries."

"Just the answer I'd expect from someone who prefers experiments over theory."

"What are you saying? Master Huey, it is you who places so much stock in experiments, isn't it? That's precisely why I'm curious about the outcome of your current plan! In its service, I'll freely exhaust those dear, precious children Rhythm developed for Larva!"

"If you treat your guinea pigs as personal property, they'll betray you one of these days." Chuckling, Huey raised a cup of tea to his lips.

"Ha-ha-ha! Now there's something I never thought I'd hear from you. You treat the entire world as a subject for your experiments."

"In my case, it happened in reverse."

"?"

"...Once, I was betrayed by the world I saw and my clumsy ideals. That may be why I treat my own life as a grand laboratory and put everything I see into it."

Huey was gazing into the distance. He was still smiling, but Salomé couldn't

fathom what sort of emotions lay behind that expression. Still, he decided that probing any further would be *going too far* and turned the conversation away from Huey's past. "By the way, I hear you met with that Firo Prochainezo fellow yesterday. What did you discuss?"

"We simply made small talk... Although we did reminisce about Alcatraz as well."

"They told me he was the one who gouged out your eye. I'm impressed your talk ended peacefully."

"Well, I don't hold it against him."

Salomé sighed a little. "I meant Miss Leeza. I thought she might fly into a rage and force a flock of birds to assist in her revenge."

"There's no need to worry about that. Leeza isn't angry, either."

"What?"

"It seems she's fallen in love for the first time. It happened much earlier than it did for her sister." Huey began murmuring to himself. "Is it the result of so many other minds fusing with her consciousness? Or perhaps..."

Salomé's eyes widened in astonishment. "No... Wait just a minute! Miss Leeza, in love?! With Firo Prochainezo, of all people?!"

"Ha-ha. If someone hears you yelling about it, Salomé, that *will* make Leeza angry."

"Oh, erm, excuse me. I thought her only desire was to be acknowledged by you, and now... I was startled by the news that Miss Chané had found a lover as well, but in her case, seeing the man in question left me more convinced than I expected."

As they were chatting, there was a knock at the door, and the man they'd just been gossiping about appeared.

Claire Stanfield was a hitman who'd inherited the name of "Handyman" Felix Walken, a moniker that many others had owned before him.

"Hello and good morning, Dad."

“Ha-ha. Isn’t it a little soon for you to be calling me that? Melvi should make his move in earnest tomorrow night; I’m counting on you to keep him safe.”

“Yes, of course. He’s not here yet, though. Mind if I go out for a bit?”

“Do you have something to take care of elsewhere?”

For someone who’d been hired as a bodyguard, Claire was pushing it with his request, but Huey didn’t reproach him. He was asking out of genuine interest.

“Well, Cookie... Uh, Charkie the bear’s run away, so I’m gonna help look for him.”

Salomé, not Huey, was the one who reacted to that. “Oho... Do you mean that enormous bear?”

“Hmm? Yeah, but he’s not even twelve feet tall. I dunno if you’d call that ‘enormous.’”

There was no record of a twelve-foot bear on Earth in modern times, but Cookie was the only grizzly Claire knew. Although the bear was nearly ten feet tall, one of the largest specimens around, the redhead assumed he was average.

Without correcting this assumption, Salomé turned back to Huey. “Master Huey. Allow me to take part in the bear hunt as well.”

“It’s not a hunt. It’s a rescue,” Claire corrected.

“Ah, I beg your pardon.”

Giving the bodyguard a light apology, Salomé repeated his request.

“May I? We’ll be able to put the Runoratas in our debt, and besides...there’s a little something I’d like to test.”



Half an hour later Somewhere in New York A broad avenue

“Hey. I heard all about it, Nader. They tell me you were at Ra’s Lance yesterday, too,” Ladd called in a friendly way.

“Yeah... I was doing a little proxy gambling for one of the rich guests,” Nader responded with a polite smile.

Shaft had taken Nader down a big street near Little Italy to his parked car, where they'd found Ladd, Graham, and several of their thuggish underlings loitering around it.

Nader hadn't been able to get his shock and worry over Sonia out of his head, though, and even that smile didn't have much strength behind it.

"You look pretty wrung out. Did you lose your shirt or something?"

"Yesterday was just for sizing up the competition. Nobody was winning or losing."

"Ha! Playin' it safe, eh? All we did was hang around the building, pretending like we were guards. I barely even stuck my head into the casino rooms. I didn't see anybody I was after. It was boring as hell." Ladd shrugged.

Graham had clambered up to sit on the roof of Shaft's car. "Ladd, my brother...", he began. "Let me tell you a sad, sad story."

"What's up, Kid Graham?"

"Somebody once said that life should be lived on the straight and narrow. But even once you pour out all that blood, sweat, and tears, the odds of being rewarded are low. And where there's odds, there's a gamble. No! What the hell is a straight and narrow gamble?! The chips are always all over the place, and the odds are anybody's guess. In the East, y'know, I hear there's a crackerjack gambler who won himself a big old mansion and a wife with nothing but a straw for a chip!"

Graham had abruptly launched into one of his usual long-winded spiels.

Nader wasn't used to this, and his expression was clouding with consternation, but Shaft responded calmly. "Oh, you can just ignore him."

It wasn't clear whether Graham had heard, as he went on, rolling around on top of the car.

"What the hell is the 'straight and narrow' even supposed to be, huh?! Why play it safe? America's a nation of pioneers! What happened to the frontier spirit?! ...Actually, I said that in front of a guy once, and he got mad and told me that's the opinion of a bunch of outsiders who barged in, and some other guy

told the first guy he was wrong, and then they got into a great big argument about colonization and race politics, so I stopped thinking, and I was the only one who couldn't get in on that debate. So it's sad."

Graham plummeted to the depths of despair. He sprawled limply over the roof of the car, but his barely audible voice kept right on going.

"It's no good... I bet this world is one big gamble, and Earth's the banker, and it's taking the human race to the cleaners. It's a dark world out there... Of course it is; it's always night over half of it! Even if humans cut down the forests and mine the land and control the skies, we won't have won for long. You just know someday we're gonna lose big, and the world will start exploiting us. Maybe I'm actually the very first exploited human?"

"Don't sweat it. Just deck the banker and take back what you lost."

"What?! Ladd, you mean I should punch Earth?!"

"Should be easy enough, yeah? The ground don't move. Make a mountain in a sandbox, straddle it, and whale away on it."

Graham had sent himself into a depression with his crazy ramblings, and then Ladd came up with something even crazier.

Wondering what he was being forced to watch, Nader glanced over at Shaft. The man responded with the same old expressionless "Just ignore them."

"Ghk... You would say that, Ladd. People say life is full of ups and downs, and everything comes down to luck in this world, but, Ladd, you're always thinking about how to hit straight and true without leaning on luck! You taught me! Yeah, that's right! Life is fun! It's fun because we walk along the straight and narrow, taking one step at a time toward tomorrow's dream! This is a revolution, Shaft! If we can beat Earth, we can lick the Runorata Family without even trying! Ain't that right?!"

"That goes without sayin'. Everybody knew that but you, Kid Graham."

"Is that right! The world's left me behind... If life's a gamble, I wasn't even at the table yet. That means none of my previous losses count! I haven't won yet, but I haven't lost, either! A brand-new land is rolling out before me! So this—this is the frontier spirit, isn't it?!"

“Yeah, and you better keep it burnin’. Pioneer the hell out of it!”

Graham was bellowing so loud his voice echoed down the street now. Ladd shrugged it off lightly, mostly ignoring him. Lua only smiled faintly in the back seat of the car; there was no way to tell what she was thinking.

At any rate, Nader thought, if they kept this up, any curious onlookers nearby might fall on him, too. Keeping a wary eye out for strange birds or women, he called to Ladd. “And...? What did you need me for?”

“Oh yeah. You’re headed to the casino to do more proxy gambling today, right? If so, I’ve got a li’l favor to ask.”

“What favor?”

“It’s the same thing we did the other day.”

“?”

Nader felt the weight of a heavy bag come to rest in his hands.

Apprehension spread across his chest as he carefully opened the bag and peeked inside.

At the sight of a whole pile of bills, Nader’s spine froze, his bad feeling turning to certainty.

“That’s your war fund. I don’t care if you win or lose. Raise Cain at the Runorata Family’s table with that.”

“Wait... Raise Cain? You don’t mean start a fight, right?”

“Course not. You’re doing it so I can start the fight.”

“I don’t get it.” Nader tensed, pulling his cheeks taut.

Ladd went on, his eyes sparkling with glee. “It’s real simple. Just blow that dough, make people think you’re a high roller, and get the Runoratas’ attention. You can be a genius who wins big or an idiot who loses a jaw-dropping wad in a day. Either’s fine.”

“So, uh...what do you get out of that?”

“Hey, I’ve got no plans to make trouble for the fat cat you’re gambling for. Once you’re standing out and people start asking you questions, just make sure

you slip a little white lie into your story.

“...Say ‘I got a windfall on the Flying Pussyfoot.’”

“...Huh?”

For a second, his mind went completely blank.

Hey, wait, why is the train coming up now? Did I tell this guy about that? Actually, Shaft seems to know all sorts of stuff. Did he tell him? What windfall is he talking about? I wasn't even on that train...

“The Flying Pussyfoot. Sounds like a ship name, but it's not. It was the name of a transcontinental express train. If you can't remember that, write it down.”

“Y-yeah.”

What, so he wasn't saying that because he knew I was involved?

Come to think of it, I told Ladd that Placido Russo was after me, but I don't think I gave him any details about that...or maybe I did... Dammit, too much has happened over the past few days; I'm already fuzzy on who I've told about me and how much.

The one thing he was sure of was that he'd just told Pamela all about how he was Sonia's childhood friend. Czes and Rail, the kids who'd been there with them, would have heard all of that, too. Nader didn't know how they figured into any of this.

It was possible that rumors about him would be all over New York by the following day. However, Hilton and Chané had already drawn a bead on him, so the spread of those rumors wouldn't change his situation much.

Actually, I don't really get this. They said that flock of birds was Hilton. Or Leeza. Whatever her real name is; it doesn't matter. But they were...part of that woman?

Well, I mean, the women who kept finding me were all different ages and had different faces. At this point, if somebody told me the birds were in on this, too, I guess I'd have to believe them...

As he stood there in the middle of town, watching the traffic go by, he realized he wasn't dreaming. The insane absurdity of the story Czes and Rail had

told him was finally sinking in.

Compared with that, Ladd and Graham struck Nader as far more realistic. Dangerous, yes, but down to earth. Remembering what they could do, though, he decided to quit thinking about it.

“...And?”

“Well, if they hear those rumors, somebody’s bound to get interested in you. Once it’s over, maybe you’ll pick up a tail. They might even pick a fight with you.”

“That’s no good! Nobody gets anything out of that!”

“Oh yeah? If I step in and take the fella who picked a fight and slaughter him or drop-kick him or steamroll him, I’ll feel better. That’s good, right? If we pick up a wire or two while we’re at it, that’s good for my current bosses, the Gandors; plus a few thugs with mafia connections will disappear, which means New York benefits, too. Everybody wins. How ’bout that!” Ladd thumped him on the shoulder.

Timidly, Nader asked, “...What do I get out of it?”

“I’ll give you that cabbage. If you lose it, no skin off your nose; if you win, you win big. If you don’t touch the money you got from your employer, you’ll at least be able to say you broke even, get me? How ’bout that!” Ladd thumped his back even harder.

Nader was trying to think of a way to turn him down, but abruptly, his mind flipped the situation around.

Think about this.

I’m being watched, aren’t I? By several different outfits. The Division of Investigation’s watching me, too. If some big trouble really does start...would Manfred Beriam notice me?

The wish was like a walk across thin ice.

According to Pamela, Senator Beriam was watching the casino party like a hawk.

What chance did a petty thug like him have of attracting the senator’s

attention? None... Unless something unforeseen happened, and he was right in the middle of it.

“No... Wait, wait, wait.”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

Nader had accidentally spoken aloud, and Ladd got curious.

Nader gasped, eyes darting around, and then tried to cover for himself. “Oh, no... Just thinking out loud. Sorry, gimme a minute here.”

“Don’t keep me waiting too long, pal. I was thinking I’d go razz ol’ Who and say hello to the doc. I first met him on the Flying Pussyfoot, too...”

After making sure Ladd was talking to Graham and Shaft, as well as to him, Nader pretended to consider whether to take the job. He was actually thinking about what would come after that.

No, hold it, this can’t be right.

What am I thinking? What’s the point of getting the senator to notice me? I’ve got no cards to negotiate with. Up until yesterday, all I was concerned about was running away.

Intense bewilderment swept over him, but his thoughts didn’t switch back.

Nader Schasschule was a small-time crook, and no matter how he’d lectured himself, he’d never been able to take that “first step.”

He’d escaped death by the skin of his teeth, thanks to a few good people who’d chosen to save his life. He was aware he’d managed to avoid becoming totally evil, but that was as far as he could go.

So what if he wasn’t completely evil? What good did it do him? He’d thought about it over and over, but—as if being dragged into the vortex of this incident in New York and almost getting killed by Chané wasn’t enough—he’d kept on looking for a reason. In the end, all he’d been able to think of was running away.

He was aware of that, but even so, he was thinking something stupid right now. Why?

Without understanding his own mind, Nader’s head kept spinning.

I genuinely did sell the Lemures out. I don't know if that was what saved the senator's family. If he has the Division of Investigation check into me, though, won't he find out about it? Won't he learn that I sold out the Lemures?

If one of Beriam's men made contact with him, what would he tell them?

How could he get his teeth into Beriam's organization?

How could he pick up information that would be useful to them?

How could he get a bird's-eye view of the workings of this screwy casino party?

How, how, how?

The same word came and went in Nader's mind, again and again.

In the end, though, all of this was no more than a process.

He'd spotted it. Ultimately, he'd seen where that "how" was leading him—what he really wanted.

From the moment he'd met Pamela and realized that *she* was here in town—he'd probably already been trapped by his mistake.

How can I keep my promise to Sonia?

How...can I meet her with my head held high?

Even as he realized that, it hit him.

He knew why he wanted to meet a girl who wasn't even his lover, just a friend from a more innocent time.

Oh, I get it.

I'm probably gonna die.

Yeah... They'll kill me. Of course they will.

He felt as if a weight had settled onto his back, but that weight also helped keep his restless feet firmly on the ground.

Up until now, he'd denied his fate. He'd wanted to run away from it forever, but in the past half day, some unconscious part of him seemed to have accepted it.

He'd been targeted by Chané and by the Hilton sisters, who'd turned into a flock of birds. He'd painted another target on his back at the gambling den, let violent characters like Ladd and Graham mess with him, and ended up attending a casino party with all the surrounding mafia syndicates.

To make matters worse, as soon as he'd remembered his old promise, his childhood friend had turned up, about to shoot someone on orders from a politician who was doing something shady.

However, to Nader, that last part was the most important one.

Despite his best efforts, the thick mist of death around him wasn't going to clear.

If he got out of New York, he might survive.

If he made tracks on his own, abandoning that promise—the one thing that made him himself—he'd probably manage to stay alive a little longer.

How many days? Three? Five?

Hilton and Chané...

Can I really get completely away from them, and from that monster Huey Laforet?

"Hey."

The next thing he knew, Nader had spoken to Ladd.

"What? Didja decide to take the dough?"

"Uh... Just for reference, lemme ask... You said something the first time you saw me. You said I was a coward. Twitchy. Scared of dying."

"Yeah. And you still are, fella."

"How does a guy forget about dying? How can I stop being scared of death?"

This guy was one of the toughest men Nader had ever seen.

If it was a one-on-one fight, Ladd Russo might even manage to hold his own against Chané.

As Nader jumped from organization to organization, he had picked up the

ability to identify the tough guys. It was one of the few unique traits he'd acquired in life, and he was confident he could size up strong men in a variety of ways.

How could he become like them? It was a question Nader had asked for the first time—but because he'd been too roundabout when he asked it, he ended up getting a blunt answer.

"That's easy. You just have to die."

"..."

"See, whenever I see people with no sense of danger, folks who think they're never gonna die, I like to tell 'em this: 'A second from now, you might meet with an unfortunate accident and bite the big one. And that accident is me.' Then I beat 'em to death. If you ever forget how easy it is to die, I'll remind you with a personal demonstration. So don't worry about that."

Even as he thought he'd really picked the wrong guy to ask, Nader took it a step further. "So you hate heroes who aren't afraid of death?"

Ladd heaved a big sigh, shaking his head. "Nah, you've got that all wrong. Listen up: Not being afraid of death is a whole 'nother thing from thinking you're not gonna die! Most bastards who think they couldn't die are just running from it. They're refusing to see the truth. The ones who ain't scared of dying accept death and keep on fighting anyway. Killing them is boring. It's pointless."

Somewhere in there, the focus had shifted to the relative entertainment values of murders, but Ladd kept going.

"The guys who manage to live to the end are the cowards. They're the type who see me and run like rabbits. You won't even find 'em in the same room as me."

"...What if one of those cowards wanted to change something? What should he do? If he told you he wanted to stay a coward but save somebody, that he wanted to be a hero, what advice would you give him?"

"That's one heck of a question. A guy like you or Who, a hero? That ain't gonna happen... Well, it would be easy to say that, but I'm kinda curious about

it myself. Kid Graham, what do you think?”

Before Nader could stop him, Ladd passed the ball to somebody who was even worse at giving advice.

“Let me tell you a sad, sad story. A coward becoming a hero...? Is that allowed? Say Martians attacked Earth, and all the brave fellas ran in swinging and got themselves killed off, and this one guy was screaming ‘I’m scared, I don’t want to die, please spare me, dear God, help me...’ You think anyone’s ever gonna call that guy a hero?! No way! And mankind can’t beat the Martians... That means the coward’s just going to draw out his own suffering! It’s so sad...! What a sad story! Earth is done for!”

Graham’s advice really was the absolute worst.

Of the people Nader had met so far, Chané and Ladd had a few screws loose, but when it came to utterly unhinged sequences of words, this guy Graham won hands down. Since he swung that enormous wrench around, he probably had loose screws, too, but his rambling speeches made it impossible to tell whether he was smart or stupid.

Just as Nader was worrying about how to turn the conversation away from the man’s rapid-fire talk, one of the car’s rear windows opened and Ladd’s girl, Lua Klein, poked her head out. With impeccable timing, she slipped a remark of her own into a gap in Graham’s long speech.

“No, Graham, Earth isn’t doomed quite yet.”

“Miz Lua?!”

As far as Graham was concerned, Ladd was his sworn older brother, and Lua was Ladd’s fiancée. Even in simple human terms, he respected her incredible composure.

Lua almost never joined Graham’s conversations, but every so often, she’d make an apt remark and change the flow. In that sense as well, he was no match for her.

“Earth’s still got a chance...?!”

“If he managed to live all the way to the end, enduring the fear and the pain...

that coward would be the last member of our race. He'd stay human until the very last moment, continuing his resistance against the Martians just by living. That's impressive."

"What?!" Graham was astounded.

With a tranquil smile, Lua continued expanding on her theory. "He'd be utterly alone, suffering in his solitude until the day he died—and all that time, he'd be constant proof that humanity hadn't yet been destroyed. There wouldn't be anyone to record his story. No one would praise him, but I...I think that man would be a hero."

"I tell ya, Lua's the type who keeps going forward while she's looking back. Ain't she sharp?"

Ladd seemed to be bragging about his girl, which meant the only response Nader could give was "Uh...huh... Yes."

Meanwhile, Graham had begun shouting excitedly again.

"Whoa... Whoooooaaaa! This is fun! Let me tell you a fun story! And so it was that Earth was saved! Everything's two sides of the same coin, infinitely varied, and to each his own! If you change your perspective, a guy who shoulda been a coward running and running and running from the Martians does a quick-change into a hero! Three cheers for heroes! Now Earth belongs to us! He really is a hero! It's a happy ending; he saved everybody! Three cheers for mankind!"

"He's the last man alive. Who's he gonna save?" Shaft asked, apparently on instinct.

Poking him sharply with his wrench, Graham answered confidently. "The last woman alive, of course! He could even save the Martians! Yesterday's enemy is today's friend!"

"..."

Shaft was going to retort, but then he noticed that Nader was being very quiet next to him. "Oh, you can just ignore this," he hastened to say.

But in fact, ever since Nader had heard Lua and Graham's exchange, he'd been deep in thought.

Change...your perspective, huh?

Then...do I just have to get the people around me...to change their perspectives?

Was he capable of that?

The doubt did occur to him, but he understood there was no space in this situation for calculations about whether he could do it.

I'm a con man. I can't change my past.

In that case, I'll just have...to use it.

Not to help myself survive. As long as I save her, that's enough.

If I manage to trick her into thinking heroes exist on my way out, then I'm good.

And so Nader's metamorphosis began.

Yeah, that's right. That's good enough.

I'll trick 'em all. I'll make them believe I'm somebody incredible.

He wasn't becoming a butterfly. He was turning into a moth, drawn to the faintest hope.

Could a moth on a dark night fool others into thinking it was a butterfly?

Before he tried to find out, Nader quietly came to a resolution.

He'd been wavering ever since he heard Sonia's name. He did think it was weird that he'd gotten that last push from the absurd ravings of a guy with a wrench, but in a way, Nader thought it was a good fit: He was about to wade into a crazy situation.

I guess I'll start by tricking myself.

The small-time crook got his breathing under control.

He remembered his past self, a guy who had very little in common with heroes.

He thought about who he'd been before Huey had gotten his claws in him. About the guy who'd been on his way up the ladder of success.

By the time he'd emptied his lungs, the small-time crook was gone, and a man with the eyes of a con artist was standing there.

"Hmm...?"

For just a moment, Ladd was a little bewildered.

Nader was still scared, but for a second, he'd seemed like a completely different person.

"You're...Nader, right?"

"...Yeah."

However, when Ladd heard what he said next, his doubt was blotted out by delight.

"All right... I'm taking this money.

"I'll see you after the party tonight."

Chapter 27 There's No Way We Won't Be Interrupted

“Whoa. Hey, we’ve got a problem here, Me.”

“Yes, I, it’s definitely problematic.”

The twins’ search for the bear had led them to a clinic in New York City.

A crowd of rubberneckers had come chasing the rumors that a bear had appeared at a hospital, and several men in suits were standing in front of the clinic’s gate.

“Those look like cops, don’t they?”

“Yes. Fairly sharp ones at that. They may have connections to the DOI.”

As the twins were mingling with the onlookers, peering into the clinic, a car stopped on the road beside them, and several men and women emerged from it.

“...Hey, Me. Those fellas... They seem kinda nasty.”

“They certainly do, I. According to the photo we were shown, the fellow with the wrench is on the watch list here in New York.”

“Whoa, what’s up? Who’s work site is jumpin’. Somebody die?”

The clinic had been quiet the previous day. Wondering about the crowd, Ladd Russo strode through the gawkers.

“Let me tell you a sad, sad story. This mystery crowd is blocking our way. It’s a strange new normal, and my heart is— It’s flummoxed! From here to infinity! What should I do? How can I reclaim my old normal?! Who stole it?! Was it the Martians? The Venusians? Or are we Earthlings supposed to keep fighting senseless wars with each other?!”

“Um, Mr. Graham? Mr. Graham?”

Nader had said he was going to get ready for the casino party, so they’d split

up. Only Ladd, Graham, Lua, and Shaft had come to visit the clinic where their friend worked. Ladd couldn't have cared less that the general public was watching, and Graham was following him, swinging his wrench around. As a result, the onlookers in front of the clinic immediately understood that somebody dangerous had shown up, and they scattered.

The guards who were posted at the clinic's entrance didn't budge. Instead, they turned wary eyes on Ladd and Graham.

"Those men are probably with the cops," Shaft said, but Ladd didn't care. He kept going, attempting to walk past the men and into the clinic.

"Hold it. Clinic's closed today."

"C'mon, do we look sick to you?" Technically, what he and Graham did could be considered pathological, and Lua's color was never good, but Ladd didn't let that stop him. "Well, we're part of whatever's in there. You'd better let us through."

"H-hey!"

The guards hastily tried to stop him, but just then, a voice called from inside the clinic. "Oh, hey! Is that you, Ladd?! C'mere a sec and look at this! It's really something!"

Right after that, another voice said, "Hey, don't just call strangers in h— Huh? Ladd?"

Ladd smirked at the perplexed guards. "They're calling me. Not much to do about that, huh?"

Shaking off the guards, he walked into the clinic, and then he saw something he genuinely hadn't expected: a huge grizzly bear, nearly ten feet tall—and beside it, Isaac and Miria, who seemed all worked up.

"...Grrrr..."

The bear was growling deep in its throat, but it didn't seem actively hostile. Isaac and Miria were petting its back without getting swatted, which meant it was obviously pretty used to people.

"What the hell is this? When did this place turn into a vet's office?"

“Hmm... I could examine them, technically, but animals are outside my field of expertise.”

At the sound of the voice, he turned. The doctor Who worked for was standing there.

“Hey, Mr. Gray Magician. I came to give you a proper thank-you for looking out for Lua and Who on that train. What’s going on here?”

“It’s a lost bear, or so I’m told. A mafia syndicate’s escaped pet. It was apparently drawn here by the smell of the dried meat we were sending to the soup kitchen.”

“What’s the world comin’ to these days, eh? Where’s Who? Did it eat ‘im?” Ladd asked casually.

At that, the door opened, and Who himself emerged. “If it had, would you go avenge me?”

“I dunno. Even I couldn’t tell you how bears think about life and death.”

“What, that’s still the standard?” Who gave him a cold look.

Ladd let it roll off him; he was gazing at the enormous bear. He’d never seen anything like it before.

Isaac, the one who’d called him into the clinic, ruffled the fur on the bear’s back. “You just missed Firo. He was here until a minute ago, but he left for work.”

“Yes, he’s businesslike! Time is money! The Gold Rush!”

Listening to the giddy couple, Ladd sighed at missing his chance to ask Firo about Melvi. Then his focus shifted to another person. The neurotic-looking bespectacled man had been glaring at him sharply for a while now.

“And? Who’s the guy who looks ready to grouse about his job to his turtle?”

“Oh, uh... That’s Victor; he’s the man who took me to Alcatraz!”

“Don’t go around tellin’ people that. And are you just gonna ignore that bit about the turtle?!” Victor snapped, cutting Isaac off. Then he walked up to Ladd. “...You’re Ladd Russo, right? Never thought I’d see the Russo Family’s

button man walking around in broad daylight. It makes me wonder if there's any point to my damn job."

"Yeah? Are you with the DOI? Just for the record, I'm freelance now. Whatever I do, it's got nothing to do with the Russo Family, get me?"

"Huh... Ricardo Russo? Well, I doubt they can do much either way. Forget that. I'm more concerned with what you're up to here in New York."

"Hey, that's great to hear. Are you a fan? Here's the problem, though. I can tell you're the kinda guy I hate the most." Ladd narrowed his eyes and rubbed his prosthetic left hand, his lips curving. "There's a big ol' bear in front of you, plus a hitman like me, fresh out of stir. And there you are cool as a cucumber... Don't tell me you think you can't die."

Victor frowned for a moment, but his composure promptly returned. "And what if I do?" he asked, joking around.

"Well, lessee here. I owe this gray magician, the doc, so I can't make corpses on his turf."

"Smart choice. Although some might assume you got cold feet," Victor said, issuing an open challenge.

Ladd seemed to get it. He set a hand on Victor's shoulder and smiled sunnily. "So, see, I'm thinking I'll repay him."

"Huh?"

"If more people get hurt, that's more dough for the clinic, right? I think an injury that'll take thirty years to heal up all the way is best. How 'bout that?"

"How 'bout shit?! Some murder-happy hitman with no thoughts, pride, or even hits to take thinks he's threatening me? Don't you underestimate me, boy. Don't delude yourself into thinking basic violence can do a damn thing against the powers of the state. You may go around butchering people, but the nation has tens of millions of lives in its hands. The only lives *you* can control are the ones you can see and periodically jeopardize with a bullet, you feeble-minded twit," Victor snarled, veins standing out on his temples.

The agent beside him spoke up. "Uh... Assistant Director? You sound like a

dirty cop who's hiding behind the state."

"Shut the hell up! Forget that—just pitch this guy out on his ear!"

The moment Victor looked at his subordinate, Ladd raised his right arm high.

Isaac quickly attempted to mediate. "Whoa, easy, don't fight—"

But he didn't get to finish.

The grizzly, which had been crouching quietly until then, suddenly got to its feet.

"...! Dammit!"

Victor hadn't been expecting this.

When Firo had asked him to come take custody of a bear, he'd wondered what was up. Seeing how big the thing actually was had shaken him for a moment, but after learning that it belonged to the Runoratas, Victor had decided to use their pet as a bargaining chip.

Unfortunately, while they were getting ready to transport the animal to a Division of Investigation facility, in walked Ladd Russo, menace to society.

He'd assumed even this guy wasn't foolish enough to take a swing at a bear. Victor had been goading him into attacking in the hopes of creating cause for an arrest, but for some reason, the bear had made a move before Ladd did.

Hey, what gives? Why'd it get up all of a sudden?

It had been behaving itself earlier. What had changed? Victor sharpened all his senses, searching for the difference...

...but there was no need to concentrate too hard. He picked up on it right away.

"...?"

Ladd, Isaac, and Miria also seemed to have noticed it. They were looking around, mystified.

"What's that noise...? Where's it coming from?"

It was an eerie groaning sound, seemingly man-made.



Meanwhile The Martillos' underground casino

"...Interesting."

The underground casino was closed and quiet, the scars of Ladd's rampage still fresh.

Inside, Firo was dismantling slot machines.

He'd also taken apart a brand-new slot machine of the same model, one they hadn't installed yet. All the parts were spread over the floor.

During the mind-numbing work of carefully examining each individual part, Firo had come to a conclusion.

All these slot machines had rolled triple sevens on command. It was incomprehensible. If that had happened during normal business hours and customers had seen it, they would have suspected the house had done it deliberately and begun avoiding the place.

On the other hand, if he'd done that to them in the middle of the casino party, they would have gotten hate from the neighboring syndicates, too. Since they were an independent organization with their own territory, Firo and the rest of the Martillo Family had been braced for hostility from all quarters, but it would be extremely irritating if that hostility was forced on them by Melvi Dormентаire.

He'd hoped to find a way to break out of the situation as quickly as possible, but that was unlikely to happen now.

"What's the matter, Firo? What did you see? Did drowning in this sea of gears and screws and extremely man-made things finally enlighten you as to the value of Nature?"

Christopher Shaldred, who'd come to the casino to guard it, was peeking in at him with a sparkle in his red eyes. His employer, Ricardo, had come with him, and she—although Firo still assumed she was a "he"—also seemed interested in what Firo was doing. The kid was beside Christopher, watching him work.

"Well, it wasn't anything supernatural. Just stage magic... Nah, that would be rude to stage magicians." Firo shrugged, then smiled wryly. "Bottom line: Melvi

Dormентаire's just a swindler."

"Oh, you mean the guy you're settling the score with tomorrow? The one who was with that redhead when I got here...?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"And? And? What trick did this Melvi character use?" Christopher looked deeply interested.

Firo started to answer. "It wasn't even anything that clever, just brute force stuff. He— Hmm?" He broke off. "Do you...hear something?"

"...Yes...? It's probably outside."

A unique sound, like a cross between a moan and a bell, filtered into the basement casino.

Outside, it was probably pretty loud.

Firo cocked his head, wondering if it was some sort of siren. Christopher stared for a moment. "Huh? Wait... I've heard this before." Rifling through his memories, he promptly found the answer he was looking for. "Oh! It's Salomé!"

"Salomé?"

"One of Huey Laforet's men.

"The oddball who made would-be homunculi like me and Adele."



Central Park—at this point in time, Manhattan's biggest spot for rest and recreation—was already approaching a hundred years old.

On a plot of land well over a square mile in area, a variety of plants lived and thrived, turning the park into a green oasis among the skyscrapers.

Since the beginning of the Depression, many people who'd lost their jobs and their homes had bunked down here, and public order deteriorated until the government got serious and took steps. At this point in history, that slow process of recovery was just beginning.

However, at the moment, a certain area had been cleared of vagrants and regular visitors alike.

An odd group had gathered there, and a peculiar moaning roar was echoing from its center.

As that strange noise blared, a man was loudly declaiming words that were even stranger.

“Oh... Is this quake in mine ears the wrath of the gods, or the conceit of man? Wherefore doth the machinations of the modern age eviscerate the formless sky, encouraging their very existence? A seed stirs in my chest, sends a tremble to my brain, says it’s not yet enough, not enough. They grow towards a birth-cry that would consume my very soul... The seam has rent; mend it and foster a new desire in this body, which nurses a new life! My mouth shall give birth to a child called Want! And she shall scream out her first breath! Come, O undeveloped world! Stillness, may you shake and dance with silence! Negate the thrum of the world, stop the time of all creation! Ti—*gwagobha!*”

The man who’d concluded his speech with an odd shriek had thick whiskers on his cheeks and a hat that he wore pulled down low. His friends simply called him the Poet, and he’d screamed because Sickie—a beautiful woman with long blond hair and a dignified gaze—had slammed a roundhouse kick into him.

“You could have covered all that with ‘It’s noisy.’ How can you stand to make that much of a racket?” Sickie said.

Climbing unsteadily to his feet, the Poet went on, as long-winded as ever. “The victors ever falsify the era, while the defeated always chronicle history. My body has been restored by benedictions, marking invisible scars on my history with love and resentment. Destruction breeds more destruction, until at last it will blot out the sky. The scars of the brokenhearted defeated engrave history into the heavens. Erelong, it will become a roaring, swirling torrent and sweep away the era of the victors! O victors who sing the praises of the era, fear and tremble! Lashed by fraudulent rain, suffer and writhe at the applause of the losers! Thi...mrggh...”

“Is that supposed to mean ‘I’m against violence, and you’ll pay for this’? I told you to knock it off multiple times before I kicked you, and you ignored me. That’s why this happened.”

Beside Sickie and the Poet, who were having one of their usual exchanges, the

sound went on and on.

Salomé was wearing an odd speaker-like device, which was the source of the sound.

“Sheesh... And here I was wondering why he’d summoned us so suddenly. What is Salomé doing?” asked Hong Chi-Mei, nicknamed “Chi,” an Asian man with bandage-wrapped hands.

“Luring out a bear, or so he says,” Sickie told him.

“A bear? In the middle of the city?” Chi wondered whether the man had done so much research that he’d finally lost his marbles.

Frank—a huge child who was over six feet tall—answered him. “U-um. It’s the Runoratas’ pet. It ran away. So Mr. Salomé said he’d catch it... I hear the bear’s way bigger than m-me...”

“...If a bear that size is wandering around town, the police will shoot it dead in no time. That is all.”

“That’s why he said he’d catch it first...” The speaker was a girl in a thick coat who wore a stocking cap pulled down all the way over her eyes. Her soft voice was drowned out by the noise Salomé was making.

“He bragged that this noise would control nearby animals, but I’m not sure how much I believe that...,” said a woman with a beautiful design tattooed on her face.

Salomé was currently broadcasting a “sound that would lure out a specific animal species” from a set of *wearable speakers*. The storage battery that powered the speakers was attached to his back.

Storage batteries were mainly used in electric cars, but Rhythm had miniaturized theirs.

The history of electric cars was a long one. Invented in the latter half of the eighteenth century, they swept the world before the development of the gasoline-powered internal combustion engine. By 1899, an electric car that could surpass speeds of sixty miles per hour had been developed.

Edison, the famous king of inventions, had manufactured his own prototype

of an electric car, while Japan had begun to produce electric cars domestically in 1934. In tandem with these innovations, battery technology had continued to evolve.

Meanwhile, Salomé had improved batteries for his organization's private use. The one he was wearing had been specifically designed for the speakers on his back.

After traveling through bizarre and complicated circuits that Salomé had personally developed, part of the direct current that ran from the battery was converted into alternating current. A sound amplifier powered by multiple systems that ran in parallel, some using direct current and others using alternating current, produced the unsettling sound (which had also been developed by Salomé).

That sound echoed far and wide. It might have been audible miles away. Salomé intended to circle Central Park, broadcasting that sound far across Manhattan to lure out the bear. However, as Sickie and the others watched this experiment, their eyes said, *Salomé's great at making things, but he's always been crap at using them.*

In addition to Sickie and the others, there was a man in a swallowtail coat, a muscular man with glasses who was naked to the waist, and a man in a skull mask. Nearly all the members of Lamia were present.

"Why did he bring us here for this?!" Tim bellowed to be heard over the noise.

Adele put her lips close to Tim's ear so she wouldn't have to yell. "I'm not sure, but he may want people to think this is a circus performance to avoid causing a panic if the bear actually does show up. We do look like a circus, after all."

"Well, I can't argue with that." Looking at his crew of outlandishly dressed subordinates, Tim sighed. *I swear, if my brother ever sees me like this...*

Even as he thought about his big brother, who worked for the Gandor Family as their torture specialist, Tim kept his guard up, warily scanning his surroundings.

After they'd spent about fifteen minutes slowly moving through the park, out of the corner of his eye, Tim saw *it* appear.

An enormous bear, close to ten feet tall. The Runorata Family's pet.

"Whoa! It actually showed up!"

Then he realized something else.

As the bear bounded toward them on all fours, it was bringing several things they didn't need along with it.



Fifteen minutes earlier

"What's that sound, Me?"

"It sounds a little like Charlie's bellow, I."

When they heard the distant noise, Juliano and Gabriel exchanged looks.

Carefully analyzing the echoes that bounced off the skyscrapers, they guessed that the sound was coming from the direction of Central Park.

Then the door of the clinic opened, and an enormous bear shambled out.

A woman screamed, and any remaining rubberneckers scattered like rabbits.

"Yes, that's definitely Charlie, I!"

"He doesn't look like he's hurt. That's great. Let's take him home, Me."

The two tried to get closer to Charlie, but then they saw the men who'd been guarding the gate go for their guns.

The second they saw it, the two were in motion.

Juliano and Gabriel launched themselves off the ground, pulling knives from their jackets and throwing them in perfect sync. As a rule, one twin fought with a knife and the other used a gun, but they'd chosen their current weapons to keep the noise to a minimum.

The knives struck the men's guns squarely, and the sudden impact made the Division of Investigation men fumble their weapons.

"Who the hell are you?!" the men screamed as the twins appeared out of

nowhere.

“We’re here on behalf of the Runoratas. We’ve come to collect that bear, our master’s *friend*.”

“Trying to shoot the young master’s pal... You people are messed up.”

“.....! The Runoratas!”

The men almost panicked, but they promptly recovered. As they tried to level their guns again, the bear lunged heavily through the gate.

The DOI men weren’t sure whether to aim at the Runorata goons or the bear, and then things got even more confusing.

“This is fun... Let me tell you a fun story. Yahoo! It’s a bear! Ain’t it great, Shaft?! We were waiting outside for Ladd, and instead, out comes this stocky, shaggy beast! It’s a real bear, a real live bear! What a powerful build! What a beautiful coat! And a surprisingly winsome face! And those sharp teeth! If this guy were a car, I bet he’d be real fun to take apart!”

“No, no, no! You’re gonna get hurt, Mr. Graham! And even if it was safe, don’t take animals apart!”

“Hey, don’t worry. My sis told me to take good care of all animals except humans. Actually, I think the bear is gonna take you apart instead, Shaft. You okay with that?!”

“Not at all! Please don’t jinx me like that!”

Graham Specter, the man who did nothing but invite confusion and chaos, had forced his way in.

Making matters worse, Victor stuck his head out.

“Dammit! Stop that bear, men! We’ll have the city in a panic!”

As Victor drew his gun, Isaac and Miria darted out, standing between him and the retreating bear.

“Whoa, whoa! Hold up! I think this guy’s probably fine!”

“He didn’t eat us, you know?”

“You think that’s any reason to relax?! Get out of the way! Move it! Move it!

Muo—*gwuff?!*” Victor abruptly flew into the air mid-shout, did a flip, and slammed into the clinic gate.

“Ah, sorry, there. You were in the way. My fist bumped into you as I went by.”

Ambling into view, Ladd cheerfully walked over toward Graham and the bear.

In the midst of the confusion, Cookie was listening to a “voice” that seemed to be calling him.

There are various theories about bears’ hearing. Some say they can only hear as well as humans, while others say their ability to detect high-pitched sounds is far superior. Still, others say they’re more sensitive to low frequencies.

While individuals vary, Cookie—or Charlie—did have better hearing than the average bear. Although Cookie himself wasn’t aware of this, it was likely a product of the various types of training he’d been put through at the circus.

He’d go toward whatever was calling him.

It might mean food.

Or a new show there.

He might find new “small person” friends.

Maybe the people he loved and missed were waiting for him.

With these hazy emotions in his heart, the grizzly began lumbering through town.

Before long, his pace was a little too fast to count as a walk, until finally he was in a full run, leaving the uproar behind him.

He never noticed Isaac and Miria clinging to his back.



The present

“What the hell is that?!”

The thing that had appeared in the park really was Carzelio Runorata’s pet bear.

Even stranger, Tim thought he could see a man and woman hanging on to its

back. A vaguely familiar man and woman, in fact.

Then two motorcycles burst into the park, following the bear.

Are those...Carzelio's guards?!

They were Runorata Family elites who had originally worked directly under Bartolo, then had been assigned to guard Carzelio. Tim knew about the twin bikers, but given his boss was allied with the Runoratas, he assumed they wouldn't end up fighting each other.

However, the occupants of the vehicle crashing through the park fence after them were bad news.

One of them was Ladd Russo.

Meanwhile, a young guy with a wrench was gleefully doing a handstand on its roof, even though the car was traveling pretty fast.

What is this?!

Not only that, but something was clinging to the back of the car.

The bespectacled man's clothes were shredded, but he seemed to be hanging on to the rear bumper of his own free will. What was he doing?

There was one thing Tim didn't notice: In the sky above Central Park and the chaos about to ensue, several birds were wheeling overhead.



Somewhere in New York Chané's room

"Chané? Salomé and the others are about to fight some people they probably shouldn't in Central Park."

Chané Laforet turned to look at her little sister.

Leeza was currently staying in Chané's apartment with her. According to their plan, she would find Huey's enemies in town, and then Chané would promptly go intercept them.

That said, they hadn't spotted any obvious enemies since Nader's escape the previous night.

"Salomé is icky, but... What should we do?"

Chané had no reason to hesitate. She wasn't particularly close to Salomé, even if he was her father's subordinate. Still, since he did work for her father, she should probably go save him.

As her heart continued its transformation into a machine, Chané stood up slowly. Her expression was blank. She seemed to be asking for the group's location.

Leeza averted her eyes slightly, then asked a searching question. "...You're going?"

"?"

"Nader isn't there, but somebody else you don't like is... No, it's not just you. I'm also... I'm not..."

Chané realized something was off.

Despite being younger, Leeza was quite mature, often coming off that way more than Chané did—except right now, she was trembling with some kind of emotion.

Terror.

Right now, Leeza was clearly terrified of something.

"..."

Deciding this was important, Chané wrote a question on the notebook that sat on the table.

"Who is there?"

Leeza's eyes swam uncertainly. Then, remembering the fear she'd experienced, she said his name. "...It's Ladd. Ladd Russo."

"_____...!"



And so the second "crazy ruckus" of this incident began in Central Park, some distance from Ra's Lance.

It might as well have been an evening pre-event for the final ruckus that would happen at the casino on the third day.

All while the sun was still high in the sky.

Chapter 28 Communication Is No Longer Possible

Somewhere in New York

“We’ve got nothing to do until night falls, amigo. Hey, why don’t we go cut up some mafiosi from other families while we have time to kill?”

As Maria Barcelito walked, her two Japanese katana clinked at her waist.

Luck heaved a deep sigh. “Maria, it isn’t clear who our friends and enemies are yet. Why would we make more enemies for ourselves now of all times?”

“But...”

“No buts. That’s enough.”

Maria wasn’t the only one guarding Luck Gandor. In addition to the Gandor Family’s regular members, Gunmeister Smith and his young apprentice were keeping the perimeter secure. So was Alkie, who already stank of booze, even though it was early afternoon.

“Heh-heh... Exposing your life to the guns around you while rousing yourself to action. You’re quite insane. And after our previous battle, we’re now allies. Who’d have thought? I suppose it means lunacy knows its own kind.”

“Master, you would leave a stronger impression if you guarded him in silence.”

“Hmm... I see. I’ll be silent, then. Silent until the moment time is saturated with insanity.”

As Smith and his apprentice talked, Alkie was knocking back liquor from a hip flask. Maria, the one who stood out the most, was dressed as a saloon girl. With her at its center, the group was walking down a major street.

Luck was intentionally showing the people around him that the Gandors had hired dangerous hitmen.

The ordinary folks in his territory would have thought, *Maria's one thing, but it's rare to see Luck with a posse that size.*

However, a different thought would have occurred to people who knew about their situation.

The Gandors are walking around with hitmen—and they're the button men the Runoratas once hired...?

Technically, this could be seen as a way of taunting the Runorata Family.

In order to distinguish their friends from their enemies at the casino, Luck was intentionally bluffing the surrounding organizations—specifically, the Runoratas.

“What if those are hitmen, not guards? Who's the target?”

“What outfits are hostile toward them? That would be us, the Runorata Family.”

“Don't tell me they're planning to take a shot at the boss...”

Just a little bit would do.

Simply putting that doubt into their minds would restrict what his opponents said and thought.

They'd made peace with Bartolo Runorata concerning the 1932 incident. Despite that, in light of what Melvi Dormентаire had done, Luck had judged that cracks were developing in their treaty.

How much of Melvi's actions did Bartolo Runorata know? How much freedom was he giving his head dealer? One of the objectives behind this taunt was to draw out even a little of that information.

As the group walked along, they began to hear a certain sound—and their fate very slightly shifted course.

“Hmm. What's that noise? It's annoying, amigo.”

“It's echoing off the buildings. I can't really tell where it's coming from...” Luck tried to determine what the mysterious sound might be, but nothing specific came to mind. There wasn't enough variation in the noise for it to be a code,

and it had been going on too long to be some sort of signal.

Just then, Alkie stopped gulping his liquor and hiccuped, his shoulders jumping. "Oh... Thash fruhm Central Park."

"You can tell?"

"If I cudden tell a thing like 'at, it'd be time fer me to retire."

"Hmm..."

Luck found himself presented with two choices.

Should he go check it out, or should he assume it was a trap, return to the office, and tighten his security?

No. Right now, if something in the city isn't right, even if it's a little thing, I want information.

If it were something completely unrelated or some sort of malfunctioning siren, it wouldn't be an issue. He'd been a mafia boss for more than five years, though, and his instincts were sounding the alarm.

They told him something was about to happen in Central Park.

"...I'll go see what it is. Maria, Smith, Alkie—come with me, if you would. The rest of you, return to the office and tell my brothers to be on the alert."

"But...are you sure you'll be all right with just them?" one of his men asked, sounding worried.

Luck nodded firmly. "You know I don't die."

A few minutes later, Luck and the others were walking down a wide road in the direction of Central Park.

"Shouldn't you send the boy back as well?"

"No need. This fella's lunacy isn't that weak."

"...I see."

Smith was taking his apprentice around with him as usual, and Luck sighed.

Suddenly, screams let out behind him, mingling with the ongoing noise.

"Hmm...?" Luck turned, eyes narrowing.

For a moment, he suspected he might be hallucinating.

But the sight soon became undeniable reality, and it was closing in fast.

A bear was tearing hell for leather down the middle of the road, with a man and woman clinging to its back.

Luck recognized the man and woman, but the sight of Ladd and Graham following the bear was especially bewildering.

Their approach felt as if it took a very long time—but in fact, it happened all in a moment.

The enormous bear, a car, and two motorcycles raced right past them.

Graham seemed to have noticed Luck and Smith, waving his wrench cheerfully at them from the roof of the car. Before he had time to say anything, though, the vehicle roared off after the bear.

Luck was stunned.

He remained silent for a little while, but Maria’s oblivious comment brought him back to himself.

“Say, amigo? You think it’s okay if I slash that bear?”



The workers’ lodging house

“Hey, what happened last night? If you didn’t come back today, I was going to give your room away,” said Roy Maddock.

Nader shrugged. “Sorry. I was out on the town. Say, what’s that noise outside?”

“Dunno. It’s been going on for quite a while now. I don’t think it’s coming from nearby, though.”



“Is that right...?” Apparently Nader wasn’t all that interested. Leaving Roy for the moment, he walked toward his room at a brisk pace.

Once he’d made sure no one was watching, he took the fortune he’d won at the Martillo Family’s casino from its hiding place under his bed.

It’s still here, huh? I thought somebody might have walked off with it...

Nader stuffed the money into the bag Ladd had given him, setting aside a single bundle of bills.

Then he left the room, found Roy again, and held the bundle out to him.

“I’m moving out today, at least for a while. If the mess I’m in settles down, I might take advantage of your hospitality again, but... Well. For now, here’s my rent.”

“Whoa, what the—?! Where’d you get this kinda dough?! That’s way too much for rent, chief. I can’t take this!”

“Give the change to the doc, then. I owe him more than I could ever repay... Frankly, it’s the sort of debt money couldn’t cover anyway.” Handing the money to Roy, Nader added, “If you’d like, keep half of that for yourself. You helped me out quite a bit... People may come by looking for me; if they do, think of it as an apology for the nuisance.”

He’d only known Roy a few days, but Nader’s eye for people told him the man wasn’t the type to take the money and run. Even if he did, it wouldn’t matter.

I’m just doing this to satisfy my conscience anyway.

That was why he’d included enough to thank the doctor as well.

Roy sighed and shook his head. “I mean it—don’t trouble yourself on my account... Oh, Who’s bringing the soup kitchen groceries by today; I’ll give him the money for the doc. Who’s a real stand-up guy.”

Does he mean Ladd’s pal? Well, I doubt he’d have the guts to run off with it.

With that thought in mind, Nader responded a bit absently and walked away.

As he reached the stairs that would take him down to the front door, someone he knew called to him. “You’re leaving, Nader?”

It was Upham, another former member of the Lemures. Nader had approached him about selling out the organization, then gotten sold out instead. But if Upham wasn't out for blood now, neither was Nader. He considered the score settled after the incident the other day. At this point, he was actually impressed with how neatly Upham had done it.

After all, none of the people who'd sided with him and completely betrayed the Lemures had survived.

And if he'd made it off that train alive, Upham either had incredible luck or was extremely skilled at maneuvering.

"That's about the size of it. Sorry about the other day."

"Do you have somewhere to go?"

"Can't say, pal. It's not that I don't trust you, but...Hilton's in town. Chané ambushed me yesterday, too."

"Wha—?!" Upham turned pale.

"I think Huey's here, too. Watch your step out there, all right?"

"You've gotta be kidding me. Wait, wasn't Huey in...?" Upham's voice trailed off until the words were barely audible. He hadn't believed it, either. He hadn't been able to picture Huey Laforet cooling his heels in jail for years on end.

"Uh... How was Chané?"

"Same as always. Deadly as a praying mantis."

"I see... So she's doing well, huh?"

"Hey, fella, you wouldn't happen to be...? Nah, never mind. Well, the odds aren't great, but if I last till next week, I'll see you around."

Upham's attitude made it pretty clear he was carrying a torch for Chané. She had amputated Nader's hand, though, and she'd almost killed him again last night, so he really didn't feel like playing cupid.

I can't imagine that twist being somebody's girl anyway.

As he thought to himself, he heard Roy—who'd come down to the entrance hall with him—talking with Who.

“What’s the matter, Who? You look beat.”

“Well, see, there was this bear this morning...”

“A bear?”

“Yeah... Never mind. It’s the kinda story you’d have to see in the papers to believe. Still, who’d have thought Isaac and Miria had pals in the DOI?”

As Who was muttering about that, Roy handed him the money he’d gotten from Nader.

“?”

“Oh, that money’s...”

When Who heard the story, he called to Nader. “Hey, the doc’s probably not gonna accept this. He told me the cops paid for your care. He’s one of those guys who won’t take more than he feels he’s earned.”

“...Maybe so. Well, consider it as a donation toward the free meals here. If he still won’t take it... I earned that with money I got from Ladd. Just pass it back to him.”

“From Ladd? Sure, I guess, but... Look, Ladd says whatever the hell he wants sometimes. I’d watch yourself.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Nader had just accepted some of that “whatever the hell,” and he was wearing a wry smile as he left the lodging house.

“Hmm...?”

That was when he realized that the sound he’d been hearing had fallen silent.

“Well, I guess it’s fine.”

Assuming it had nothing to do with him, Nader kept on walking.

He didn’t realize he’d managed to skate by without being spotted only because Hilton had focused on the source of that noise.

The lucky con artist walked quickly through the alleys of Manhattan.

His fate and his life were now chips for the betting table, and he was headed

into a gamble to trick the world itself.



The Martillo Family's underground casino

"Huh? Did that noise just stop?"

Firo had been curious about the peculiar sound, but he'd kept working under the assumption that it wasn't worth leaving the casino for. But when the sound abruptly dwindled, it caught his attention again.

"What was that? I seriously doubt it, but... Don't tell me Huey's outfit is pulling something."

Christopher had been talking to Ricardo in a corner of the casino, but now he made his way over to Firo. "I'll go take a look. If I find anything, I'll report back later."

"Good idea. Ricardo's a fine kid, but you're just noisy and in the way here."

"Wow. Only a real friend would give it to you straight like that, wouldn't they?!" Cackling, Christopher gave a self-deprecating shrug.

Firo didn't look up. "Yeah, basically," he replied lightly.

"Huh?"

Christopher hadn't been expecting that. His red eyes widened for a moment.

"Well, not 'friends,' exactly, but we've got a connection I couldn't shake if I tried. So...don't do anything too crazy. It's sad to lose a fella you know, even if that fella is somebody like you. Plus, if we ended up fighting and I had to kill you, I'd lose sleep over it no matter how bad of a person you were. If you say we're friends, then don't make me worry about you."

The words were half-sarcastic, and he didn't stop working as he spoke.

Still, he caught Christopher off guard. "That's a shock. You're too nice for your own good, aren't you, Firo? Do you say things like that to all your friends?"

"I'm saying it to you because you're trouble... Honestly, y'know, aside from the family and the guys I've known most of my life, I don't have too many friends. Isaac and Miria might count. They're trouble in a different sense of the

word, but still. And then Czes is more like a kid brother..." Firo smiled wryly.

In the full knowledge of his situation, Christopher brought up another name. "...What about that girl, Ennis?"

"Ennis is family. Same as the Martillos," Firo said immediately, although his hands stopped as he gave the answer. He turned to look at Christopher.

His eyes were unclouded—*so terribly clear* that they sent a shudder down Christopher's spine.

"I see... Well, as a fellow homunculus, I'll help in any way I can."

"Thanks for the thought; I appreciate it. This is our problem, though. The Russos are our guests; we can't cause trouble for you... Hey, wait. Are you allowed to just go around saying that?"

Christopher and Ennis weren't the same type of homunculus. While they both wouldn't age, Ennis was fully immortal, and Christopher could be killed.

Either way, it didn't strike Firo as something the general public should know about. Was it okay to let Ricardo Russo hear about it?

Firo's glance made his thoughts pretty obvious, and Christopher answered nonchalantly. "Sure, it's fine. Ricardo knows plenty already. Aaall sorts of things." He shrugged.

Firo was puzzled, but he thought, *They must be close enough for that kind of trust*, so he let it slide and turned back to his work. "Be careful out there. With your skills, I doubt we need to put a guard on you, but you be sure to keep your boss safe, all right? The big event may be tomorrow, but there's no telling what's gonna happen today, either."

"I know. Okay, I'm off for a bit."

With that, Christopher left the casino.

After a little while, Firo spoke to Ricardo, keeping his eyes on his work. "Hey, Ricardo. I dunno what your connection to that guy is, but are you getting by okay?"

Ricardo didn't answer.

“Huh?” Firo turned back, scanning the room. The Russo Family boss was nowhere to be seen.

“...Did he head out with Christopher?”

As they climbed the casino’s stairs side by side, Christopher spoke to Ricardo. “You could stay here, you know.”

“No... I think I should go with you.”

“And? What’s Sham saying?”

“That it’s starting already. He says the immortal from the DOI is there, too, although he doesn’t know why. You should be careful.”

Ricardo had a mental link to Sham, a collective who worked under Huey, and she was able to talk with them in her mind.

Them was a bit misleading, since there was just one main personality, but Sham’s awareness was scattered all across America. He was simultaneously one and many, and his job was gathering intelligence for Huey.

Since Ricardo shared a corner of Sham’s consciousness, she could tell what was happening in other places. That said, she tended to learn information she didn’t want to know and often found herself reluctantly driven to act on it.

“So Salomé and Chi and Sickle and the rest have run into that violent relative of yours and the nutcase who fights with a wrench? Sickle’s group just keeps meeting that guy, don’t they?”

“...Yes. Although I doubt Salomé knows about Graham and Uncle Ladd. To be honest, I can’t begin to predict what the bear or Isaac and Miria are going to do. Rail’s off doing something with that immortal kid Czes, so she’s not there.”

This obviously wasn’t a situation that was going to resolve itself peacefully. Christopher’s lips curved cheerfully, and he began skipping toward Central Park.

“You seem happy, Chris.”

“I do, don’t I?” Christopher gave a bright, feral smile, his heart soaring as he continued his jaunty footwork. “Central Park is Nature’s home right in the middle of the city. I’ll get to see everybody again as they plunge into chaos, surrounded by that natural environment. Life really is full of diversions, isn’t it?”

Not only that, but there's a huge bear on the scene! What would be natural, or unnatural, for an unnaturally domesticated child of Nature to do in the midst of unnatural Nature? ...Whoops. Even I lost track of where that sentence was going. Ha-ha!"

Ricardo gave a little sigh. "Chris, the things you say change every day. You and Graham would give each other a run for your money."

"That guy changes by the second, though. Don't pretend we're the same." Giving a fiendish smile full of fangs, Christopher lightly spread his arms wide and *danced along*, voicing the gratitude he felt to the patches of blue sky between the buildings.

"Well, let's not worry about such trivial details. C'mon and dance! Dance! You can bet someone will have this unforeseen situation in the palm of their hand before too long. Let's give that hand a good kick, shall we? Who for, you ask? Why, for the sake of someone chosen by Nature!"

Christopher kept yelling nonsense.

However, as Ricardo watched him go, she was sure of one thing.

Christopher was in an uncommonly good mood today. It was probably because he'd received an unambiguous admission of friendship (albeit a friendship he "couldn't shake") from someone he'd assumed didn't even like him. Christopher had made a friend, and Ricardo envied him. Still, she decided to be happy for him, being another of his friends herself.

Ricardo didn't let those emotions show. She only told Sham about them privately, with a hint of pride.



Central Park

“Not good... This is not good...”

Shaft—one of the Shams—had heard Ricardo’s bragging, and he was turning pale at the idea that the situation was about to get worse.

O-on top of all this, Christopher is on his way over? And he’s already wound up?

He ground his teeth. He was staring at something.

A chaotic battle.

The situation was so confused that there were no other words to describe it.

It had started a few minutes earlier.

The bear’s appearance had put Salomé in a good mood, but as he’d switched off the sound system, he’d been puzzled by the people who’d arrived with it.

The first ones to get a handle on the situation had been Graham, who was brandishing his wrench on the roof of the car—and Sickle and a few other members of Larva who’d fought him in Chicago.

“Wha...?! What’s that guy doing here?!” Sickle asked.

Frank squeaked in fear, and a shudder ran through his big frame, while Chi looked sour.

Meanwhile, Graham looked around, confused. Then he screamed and pointed his enormous wrench at a whiskered man. “Aaah!”

Sensing that a fight was brewing, the man had put some distance between himself and Sickle’s group. In other words, it was the Poet.

“It’s him! The god of word-souls! What are you doing here?!”

“.....”

The Poet hadn’t expected to be singled out first, and below his hat, his eyes widened.

Salomé frowned at him. “...Are these friends of yours, Poet?”

Meanwhile, Ladd had stepped out of the car and was rolling his shoulders to

loosen them up. “You know that fella with the beard?” he asked Graham.

“What joy... Let me tell you a joyful story! Ladd, you are looking upon a god! The god of words, who governs their souls! Once you hear his voice, a breeze blows through the landscape of your mind, the wide world bursts into song, the wind rages, the songbirds dance, volcanoes erupt, taxes go up, and my heart is down for the count!”

As if in response, the Poet was explaining Graham to Salomé. “He is power. He is chaos. He is order. He is Good. If Fate truly is a wheel, then human ties are the door of an abandoned house surrounded by the ruts it has left behind! At times they lead to purgatory; at others, they beckon souls to an endless wasteland... Flee! Fly! The wheel turns, on and on! Alas, the closed ruts can never escape Fate... Thus life is carried to death and converted to life...”

“...Sickle, tell me what he said.”

At Salomé’s request, Sickle clicked his tongue irritably. “He says we’ve met this freak before. He’s dangerous, so run for it.”

“Run? Ha-ha-ha. Poet, Poet. Has your brain finally gone as funny as your tongue? ‘Run’? With all these Larva members here with us?” Salomé shook his head, as if the idea were ridiculous.

However, Sickle’s next words made his expression freeze.

“I’ll keep him busy. While I do, the rest of you run. Give up on catching the bear for now.”

She took a step forward, and the members of Larva exchanged looks.

“Wait, wait, wait, Sickle. Are you mocking the results of my research? They include you, Sickle. Your fighting skills alone are far beyond that of any ordinary person. At the right distance, I believe you could take down three shotgun-wielding mafiosi without sustaining any damage.”

“I see. That makes explaining simple, then. That guy’s a hell of a lot more dangerous than three shotguns.” As she spoke, Sickle was looking at her ankle, her face twisted with the memory of past humiliation. “He dislocated my leg joints with that wrench. In the middle of combat. He was fighting Frank, Chi, and Leeza at the same time, and he still...!”

Ladd was listening to their conversation, obviously entertained. He turned to Graham. “Oho, I see. Yeah, the guy with the beard seems like your type. I want to introduce him to that moron Smith; I bet that’d be fun. I can’t wait to see how that conversation pans out.”

“The god of word-souls and Mr. Smith?! Terrifying... Let me tell you a terrifying story. If we combine the lunatic landscape of Smith’s mind with the god of word-souls, what will become of the world? Will all the damage stay inside Smith? No, it will not! I bet a bunch of insane word-souls will turn into bullets and shoot out at the rest of us! Stars that churn like a sandstorm! Wind that blazes like lava! Endless, impossibly bright darkness! This is bad, Ladd—if we let those two meet, they’ll destroy the world!”

“What’s with that guy?! He just looks like a drunk to me!”

“He’s stone-cold sober. He doesn’t drink or do any kind of drugs—his brain is always busted like that. That’s what’s so scary about him. Even if we all jump him at once, we gotta be smart about it, or he’ll make us regret starting a fight.”

Sickle’s words perplexed her companions.

“That’s ridiculous. It’s not as if he’s the redheaded hitman!” Salomé shouted, remembering the incident with Felix—Claire Stanfield—just the other day.

Sickle wasn’t acquainted with Claire, so the remark went right over her head, but—

“...Huh?”

That response came from someone Salomé hadn’t expected.

“Hey, you over there. Fella. Did you just say ‘redheaded hitman’?”

“Who’s that man? Oh, he was on the watch list, wasn’t he...?” Taking documents out of his coat and flipping through them with a practiced hand, Salomé began to read what was written there. “Is he this ‘Ladd Russo’? And the one with the wrench is Graham Specter...” He sounded dubious.

Then he noticed something.

The Runorata Family’s twin guards had gotten off their motorbikes and were approaching the enormous bear.

“I see. They’d found it already, had they? Still, it was we who managed to lure it here. I believe we may consider our experiment a success.” As Salomé murmured, his interest in Ladd Russo had nearly evaporated—but then Salomé realized that Ladd seemed to have physically evaporated.

“Hmm...?”

The next instant, something hit Salomé from below. Out of a blind spot, the heel of a palm had struck his throat. Salomé grunted as the assailant clutched his neck and hoisted him high into the air with only one arm.

“Don’t you ignore me. I’ll get lonely, see?” The voice had a vicious edge to it.

Until a second ago, Ladd had been five yards away. In the moment Salomé had taken his eyes off him, he’d closed the distance and hit him with a surprise attack.

“Why you—! Let go of Salomé!”

The members of Larva had relaxed upon seeing the Runorata guards, believing reinforcements had arrived. They hadn’t been prepared for the sudden change in the situation, but now they rushed Ladd.

Before they got there, though, a silver disc blocked their way.

Or rather, Graham Specter was spinning his wrench so fast it looked like a solid disc, and he was using it as a shield to keep them at bay.

“Let me tell you a sad, sad story...”

Swinging around a shield that could easily become a lethal weapon, Graham nearly howled with excitement. “My brother Ladd is giving a lecture! A lesson in life and death... That’s his theory of education. He ain’t no teacher, but he teaches people anyway. I could never do that... Which means, well, you know, and so on, and so forth! So stay out of his way, wouldja?”

As Graham ended his terrifically self-absorbed speech, a member of Larva lunged at him—

—and the chaos began.



Inside the office of the restaurant and bar Alveare

“...Ronny still isn’t back?”

Molsa Martillo, the Martillo Family’s *caposocietà*, was speaking with Maiza Avaro, the family’s *contaiuolo*.

“No. He hasn’t sent word, either... This has never happened before.”

“Hmm...”

To Molsa, Maiza seemed superficially calm. However, his subtle gestures weren’t quite the same as usual; he was rattled.

“Well, he has ‘vanished suddenly’ before, from time to time. He told me it would happen when he joined the family. I took him on in the full knowledge of that, and Ronny has done enough work to make up for it. Wouldn’t you say so?”

“Yes. He’s saved the family time and time again.”

“The neighboring outfits probably think we can’t do anything if he’s not here. That includes the Runoratas.” Molsa chuckled.

Maiza hastily began to deny it. “That’s not—”

“Wait, not so fast. I didn’t say that to run us down.”

“?”

“I’m only saying this because I’m convinced that Ronny is fine, but...” Maiza didn’t physically react, but there was a question in his eyes. Molsa went on evenly. “What I’m getting at is that this is a juicy situation for us.”

“It is...?”

“We’ve got a whole bunch of outfits at that casino party, all in one place, and the Melvi kid who’s with the Runoratas messed with our family. Right now, the Martillos and the Runoratas look ready to go to the mattresses. Lots of people probably see it as a fight between a shark and a sardine... No, I bet they only see us as shark bait.”

As a matter of fact, the Martillo Family was one of the smallest syndicates in New York, and it didn’t have the sort of network the mafia outfits had. Like the Gandors, they were a tiny, independent organization that defended their small territory in isolation.

However, while their territory was small, it was Manhattan territory.

Lots of organizations would have liked to get their hands on those concessions if they could. The Runoratas probably thought the turf would make a perfect first step toward taking a bigger chunk of Manhattan.

“Not only that, but our linchpin Ronny Schiatto isn’t here... Isn’t that great? We don’t even have to pretend to be weak; the other guys have all let their guards down already. I know Bartolo Runorata isn’t a man to get careless, but from what I hear...I’m not sure that holds for Melvi, and he’s the one who picked a fight with us.”

“True, he does sound very confident in himself.”

Melvi Dormentaire bore a strong resemblance to Maiza’s little brother Gretto.

Maiza had mixed feelings about this, and he did want to know the other man’s real identity and where he’d come from. However, now wasn’t the time to focus on that.

Melvi had messed with his family. Even if he’d been his actual brother, Maiza had pledged to his syndicate that he’d take his knife to any enemies of the family. It had taken a lot of work, but at this point, he saw Melvi as an enemy, plain and simple.

Tapping a finger firmly on his desk, Molsa filled Maiza in on their game plan. “But we can’t sit here jawing about some guy we’ve never met and using our imaginations to fill in the blanks. That’s a surefire way to get sloppy. Firo’s the one who’s met him in person. When it comes to what we do at the casino, maybe we should trust his judgment the most.”

Wearing a smile that seemed somehow boyish on his seasoned, elderly face, Molsa turned to the handful of men who were in the room.

“Every once in a while, we should let Ronny know he doesn’t have to worry.

“We’ll show him his organization can take care of itself if he wants to take a long break now and then.”



Central Park

“Wow, this is even crazier than I thought it would be.”

Walking past fleeing people, his eyes shining, Christopher reached his destination in a corner of Central Park. “I wonder how much longer we’ve got until the cops show up? Or maybe somebody’s made sure they won’t be able to make it... Either way, I doubt the first few officers on the scene will be able to do anything about this.”

The only word for what Christopher was seeing was *melee*.

Ladd Russo and Graham Specter were fighting a no-holds-barred battle against the members of Larva, while a set of twins he didn’t recognize were riding motorcycles in circles around the brawl.

A gigantic bear stood just outside the fight, with Isaac and Miria on its back. A pale woman and Graham’s friend Shaft were standing beside a car that was parked nearby.

A bespectacled man in ragged clothes lay behind that car, but he was just getting to his feet.

Technically, the composition of the fight was simple—Graham and Ladd against the members of Larva—so *melee* might not have been an appropriate word. However, to Christopher, the reckless violence looked like the indiscriminate rampaging of small, humanoid disasters.

“Ha-haaah! You’re a hell of a good time! What are you people, street performers?!”

As the members of Larva attacked using a huge variety of methods, Ladd swung his arms around with delight. He caught Sickle’s kick with his right hand, knocked away Chi’s iron claws with his steel left arm, then kicked someone else flying.

“Dammit... A pal of the guy in the blue coveralls, huh? He’s pretty inhuman himself,” Sickle said, ignoring her own status as a homunculus.

As a matter of fact, it wasn’t just her. Even to Salomé the researcher, Ladd’s physical abilities seemed abnormal.

Maybe it was all the murders he'd committed, or maybe there had been some other cause. It seemed as though he'd overloaded some sort of mental limiter that usually kept him from destroying his body, and he was working his body to its limit. He had to be damaging his bones and shredding his muscle fibers as he fought, but maybe the very pain was a thrill to him.

Meanwhile, the other man was plenty abnormal as well.

"Let me tell you a sad, sad story. Me and the sister in green had a whole episode together a while back, but I'm pretty sure we ended up making peace sort of by accident there in that restaurant. Look at us now, though! Ladd got all excited for no reason, and now, we're enemies again... If this is fate, I'm not going to restaurants ever again! Get me?!"

"What the hell are you on about?! You could have just stopped that psychopath! Besides, I haven't forgotten how you dislocated my leg!" Sickie yelled angrily.

"I see...," Graham replied, still twirling his wrench. "In that case, your anger is justified! Meaning it wasn't the restaurant's fault! This is terrific. Calcium's good for making your bones stronger... I hear big-shot scientists experimented on rats in 1921 to prove it. What about dislocation, then?! Does calcium work on the stuff that links your bones together, too?! Crap, I won't even be able to sleep at night now! Could you prevent dislocations by taking a good balance of nutrients in addition to calcium? In that case, restaurants are actually an ally of mankind. So when you're done taking revenge on me, why don't we all go to a restaurant?! Peace will come, flowers will bloom, butterflies will sing... Wait, do butterflies sing?!"

"Hell if I know!" Temples twitching, Sickie launched herself off the ground. "What is it with you and the Poet?! If you're a man, talk with your body instead of your words for a change!"

"Talk with my body...? You mean like flag semaphore?"

"No! Are you mocking me?!" A sharp kick flew at the back of his head, where it would hit his medulla oblongata.

As Graham dodged it, another member of Larva took a shot at him with a chain weight.

Graham trapped it with his wrench, then leaped at yet another opponent, using the chain that was now tangled around his wrench as part of his own weapon.

The scene was utter chaos, but someone was watching it with calm eyes.

It wasn't Christopher, who'd just arrived.

It was the cause of the ruckus, the one who'd been watching the situation unfold from the very beginning.



What's going on?

I came because I thought someone was calling me, but none of my friends are here.

There's a crowd of people. They're all being noisy. Someone's on my back.

They're loud, but they look like they're having fun. Warm memories.

I remember. I remember it. That's right: This is a circus.

I wonder where the ringmaster is.

Where's Parrot?

Sparkly Dou isn't here, either. I can smell something similar, though.

Where are Claire and Cazze? They were here yesterday. Where are they?

If I shout for them, will they come?



The enormous grizzly's roar echoed through Central Park.

There was no hostility or malice in it, but almost everyone froze for a moment.

Thanks to their animal instincts, they were frightened by the roar of a creature stronger than they were.

While Ladd, Graham, and Christopher weren't afraid of the sound, per se, every cell in their bodies urged them to be cautious.

Every eye was focused on that huge bear.

As a result, Salomé, Sickie, and the others still hadn't noticed that Christopher

was right next to them.

Meanwhile, Cookie looked around restlessly, as if he was searching for someone, but then his eyes stopped on a certain point. He'd spotted a black shadow coming his way...not either of the people Cookie was waiting for.

"Hmm...?"

Ladd had noticed the bear's eyes come to rest on something, and as he followed its gaze—a silver flash bore down on him.

"Whoops!"

At the last second, he blocked with his prosthetic left arm, and a loud metallic *clang* rang out.

The face that had materialized in front of Ladd was one he recognized.

"...Hey there."

"....."

"So you survived, huh?" Ladd grinned ferociously.

The black figure leaped back, putting distance between them.

At that point, everyone else saw Chané Laforet wearing a black dress and holding a knife in each hand.

"....."

Silently, she glared at Ladd.

The sharp light in her eyes was a blend of hostility, determination to kill, and nothing else.

"Oh, hey! If it ain't Chané! I see... So karma's finally pulling you and my brother Ladd together again, huh?! Let me tell you a sad, sad story! I don't hate you one little bit, Chané, and I can't sell Ladd out, either. Does that mean I can't take sides here?! No! I'll just have to take both your sides! Meaning I was born in order to keep anyone from getting in the way of the historic moment when your grudge is resolved once and for all. Am I overreacting? Nah, no way! After all, people go through thousands upon thousands of meanings over the course of their lives!"



“What’s this? You two know each oth—? Whoa!”

Ladd’s eyes had ticked over to Graham, and in that split-second time, Chané had tried to slash his throat. Ladd dodged by the skin of his teeth, took a step back, and shouted a taunt at her.

“Ha! Nice work, dollface! Haven’t seen that since the roof of that train. I can tell now, seeing you here—that bastard Huey Laforet’s close!”

“.....”

Chané’s feelings didn’t waver, though. Darting in close to Ladd, she slashed at him sharply twice, then again.

Ladd knocked each blow away dexterously with his prosthetic hand, then unleashed a left hook that could easily have snapped a baseball bat.

Chané avoided it at the last second, putting plenty of distance between them.

“Miss Chané?! Why are you here?!” Salome shouted.

Chané heard him, but her attention stayed focused on Ladd.

She knew she couldn’t afford to give him the tiniest opening.

At the same time, her emotions quietly boiled down.

Her memories of the past had finally caught up to her emotions.

The Flying Pussyfoot...

As she remembered Ladd on the roof of that train, the blood that coursed through her veins picked up speed—filling every muscle in her body with the resolution to fight.

And then the real melee began.

There was no need for words.

After all, everyone here was a savage beast who’d lost all concept of order.

As if she were telling them so, Chané launched herself into a sprint.

Chapter 29 We've Got No Choice

Somewhere in New York A guest room at the Runorata Family's villa

"...In Central Park?" Melvi Dormентаire frowned.

Huey Laforet nodded, smiling faintly. "That's right. If this goes on, I imagine it's going to cause an uproar. Many people saw an enormous bear running through town. Since it ran into the park, the Division of Investigation is apparently getting the police to cordon it off. Even so, I doubt they'll be able to deter the would-be spectators."

"Damn that Salomé... Why would he do something that would draw so much attention?"

"In his own way, he probably wanted to prove the results of his research. A method of manipulating bears using sound would be rather useful... He must have planned on putting the Runorata Family in his debt," Huey said indifferently. He was still wearing that smile.

Meanwhile, Melvi's expression had turned sour. "Are you insinuating I'm not capable of controlling the Runoratas from the inside, Huey?"

"No, not at all. I don't think you're incapable, and controlling the Runoratas was never my intention in the first place. I only meant that someone else may be thinking it. I would imagine there are many Runorata Family members who find both of us a nuisance."

"I really don't want the remaining two days of the casino party to be canceled over this."

"I wouldn't worry about that. The incident in Central Park is superficially unrelated to Ra's Lance. Even if all the people causing it have ties to the casino."

"You may be all right with that, but—"

"Does the House of Dormентаire have a different intention?"

Huey's words seemed like a test, and Melvi's eyes narrowed slightly.

Don't look down on me, you bastard. You won't be able sneer like that much longer.

Melvi had been sent by the Dormentaires to work for Huey Laforet, but personally speaking, he had no respect for the immortal.

Do you understand at all?

You may be an old immortal, but all you've done is accumulate more knowledge than I have.

Really, if I put my right hand on your head right now—

For a moment, Melvi's perception of time stopped. It wasn't only his mind that had frozen; his heart might have stopped briefly as well.

He'd realized *there was something on his forehead.*

The moment he recognized the sensation as Huey Laforet's right hand, he broke out in a full-body sweat, although he couldn't move a muscle.

That's ridiculous. Ridiculous, ridiculous, ridiculous.

When on earth did he...? When did he—?!

"Ever since I was a boy, I've had a particular talent for this sort of thing. Something as simple as putting my right hand on a man in front of me takes less time than it does to blink."

"Ah...kh..."

Melvi couldn't even breathe properly, let alone speak. All that left his mouth was a low groan.

"You've left yourself completely vulnerable, Melvi. Firo Prochainezo is willing to kill you if he must. If this is all you're capable of, he'll eat you, and that will be the end of it. If I were you, I'd avoid being in the same room with him. Actually, I wouldn't even enter the same building."

"....." Melvi was silent.

Removing his hand from his forehead, Huey slowly got to his feet.

A flash of intense emotion nearly caused Melvi to lunge at Huey, right hand first—but all his nerves rejected the orders his brain was sending.

A moment later, his mind got the message as well.

He's left no openings.

Melvi did have an explosive temper, but he wasn't foolish enough to let it destroy him on a whim. He couldn't have become Time's leader otherwise.

The experience he'd accumulated over the course of his *relatively* long life seemed to be screaming at him that now was not the time to act.

"...Don't worry. I won't get careless with Firo Prochainezo."

"I suspect there are many people besides Firo that you should be wary of. Several of them are currently causing a disturbance in Central Park."

"It's all right. I'll handle them somehow, too. Personally."

"You don't have to be so eager, you know. Whether you succeed or fail at the casino party, the very existence of the event means my objective will be achieved."

Shrugging, Huey left the guest room.

"As far as I'm concerned, both your animosity toward Firo Prochainezo and this uproar in Central Park are mere distractions. Meanwhile, they are your greatest objectives. I won't interfere with the results, so..."

Huey was still smiling faintly. As he pulled the door closed behind him, he gave the petrified Melvi one last bit of encouragement.

"By all means, enjoy the gamble as much as you can... Don't leave yourself with regrets."



Central Park

“Ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Hellooooo, Martian girl! It’s been forever!”

Ladd Russo was the first one to speak, of course.

That said, even if Chané had been able to use words freely, she had no intention of shooting the breeze with Ladd. Naturally, she wasn’t inclined to listen to him, either. The knives in her hands flashed through the air again and again.

“Man oh maaan, it really has been ages! Well, how’s it going, little girl? You finally grow up? Is your pwecious puppy love for that Huey Laforet bastard still —? Whoops!”

Still yelling enthusiastically, Ladd bent backward, and silver streaked through the air where his throat had been a moment earlier.

Ladd didn’t try to distance himself from the barrage of slashes. Instead, he flipped his torso back in the other direction, wedging himself into a gap between the blades.

“—!”

Before she could counter with another slash, Ladd slammed a punch into her.

A shock like a blow from a steel ball ran through Chané’s forehead, but she’d dodged just in time to avoid taking major damage.

“Ha-ha! I was gonna break your nose, but I missed!”

“.....”

His brutal smile hadn’t changed a bit.

Chané considered Ladd her mortal enemy.

She understood she’d had the disadvantage on top of that train, and that he wasn’t a good match for her. She didn’t shrink from him, though.

Unlike in her earlier fight with Ladd, her footing wasn’t unstable here. That one difference had improved Chané’s movements dramatically.

Ladd was fighting under the same conditions, of course, but Chané had always

been the type to capitalize on her speed and leap every whichway. Not only was she on stable ground now, but she had a lot more room to maneuver. This environment was much more favorable for her.

...At least that was what Chané thought, but she didn't let herself get careless.

The stability also helped Ladd's footwork, and being able to plant his feet let him punch harder. She couldn't ignore either of those things.

Plotting the best trajectory for slitting Ladd's throat, Chané ran her blade along the "track" she'd envisioned. Her blades didn't move quite as fast as her thoughts, though; they missed Ladd's arteries by a hair, and she only grazed his skin and drew a little blood.

Of course, she didn't stop there.

She swept her knife through space by the shortest possible route, planning to jam her blade into his side as he bent backward, but...

"Whoa, that ain't—safe!"

...his steel hand sent that knife flying.

Even then, Chané didn't stop. She spun, slamming her second blade home in a follow-up attack.

Ladd caught it between the joints of his prosthetic hand.

The creak of those iron joints echoed between them, and their animus seemed to shimmer in the air around them.

"....."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Nice! This is great! Your moves are even sharper than before! That said, we always were pretty sharp mentally, you and me!"

Chané was pouring all the focus she'd gained by losing her speech into the fight. In contrast, Ladd flexed his strength while talking a blue streak, but she couldn't sense any stagnation in that "strength"—that violence.

Even his taunts felt like nothing more than an outlet for his excess energy. He was grinning like a fool, but if there was such a thing as "purity" in bloodlust, Ladd Russo had to be giving off the purest stuff in New York City at the

moment.

Shaft knew both of them well enough to read that much of the situation, but there was one thing he hadn't picked up on.

The murderous aura around Ladd wasn't lusting for Chané's blood.

It was concentrated on Huey Laforet, Melvi Dormентаire, and Claire Stanfield. Men who weren't even here.

"What...is that guy?"

Sickle had been wondering whether she should go back Chané up, but it didn't seem like the sort of fight anybody could break into.

Her muscle-bound Larva teammate had rushed Ladd, intending to pin his arms, but Ladd had said, "Whoa there, don't rain on my parade, fella" and sent him flying with one arm. Soaring, really, even though the man weighed well over two hundred pounds.

When she'd seen that, Sickle had turned her attention to Graham, who was still blocking their way. "No human's got an arm like that! What the heck is that guy?! How do you have to grow up to get like that?!"

"I'm pretty sure my man Ladd grew up in a normal family. He said he was raised in the usual way, by ordinary parents, who steered clear of the mafia. But! Ladd didn't let them tell him who to be! He became a true-blue killer, which means he's no ordinary fella! Before they sent him to the big house, he used shotguns and knives and what have you, but now he doesn't even need that. He's gonna get rid of all the knives and guns on the planet! He's a messenger of peace!" Graham's eyes from behind his bangs widened in crazed admiration.

Meanwhile, as Ladd evaded Chané's knives, he said from behind Graham, "That ain't it, Kid Graham. If I've got a weapon, I'll use it. I'm just not in the mood right now is all. When I use guns, that *thud* of the recoil and the spray of blood give you that feeling of 'Oh yeah, I killed somebody.' With knives, the *shunk* and the heat of the other guy's blood make you think, *Wow, damn, I really killed that guy.* I like 'em both just fine."

As he dodged a string of knife strikes with footwork on the level of a pro

boxer, Ladd went on smoothly. It was as if his mouth and vocal cords belonged to some completely different creature.

“Lately, I’ve missed it like you would not believe—the feeling of crunching something with my fist or the raw *krxxk* of snapping necks. Goddamn, give me anything, a *thud* or *shunk* or *grunch* or *krxxk*—just give me something. Anything! Here’s the thing! My urge to kill just has to get through to the other fella. If I pull out a gun, everybody knows I’m trying to kill him right off the bat, see?! They say the only ones who should kill are the ones who are prepared to be killed, but hey, I’m prepared. Now, if I don’t give the other guy a chance to be prepared, it’s rude, get me?”

“Whoa! I think we might not be talking about the same thing anymore. Still, from what you said, did I get it wrong again?!”

“Nah, the part about not needing weapons to kill people was right on the money, so you were half right. I’d give it fifty points.”

Chané leaped in as Ladd spoke, and he tumbled forward, dodging by going right under her.

As Sickie watched him, the furrow between her eyebrows got even deeper. “How is he managing to dodge knives that fast with all that yelling?”

Next to her, a man who seemed to have spawned from thin air spoke with a knowing look. “It’s the other way around. He’s using his words to set the rhythm for his body. That’s what lets him move like that.”

“.....?!”

When Sickie saw who’d spoken to her, she shrieked and did a double take. “Chris?! You’re— Why are you here?!”

“The guidance of Nature. It’s been a few months, huh! All right, let’s sing! A song to celebrate our reunion and to praise Nature! ♪ Cooome, carried off by a beeeear, weeee will reuniiiite in its stoomaaaach, la-la-laaaa. ♪ Also, sooorry, that stuff about his body and the rhythuum was just something I pulled oooooouut oooof myyyy aaaaass. ♪”

Christopher was singing in a pointlessly operatic way by the end, and everybody else noticed him at once.

“Hrumph! There you are, you devil... I guess we’re done with both sad stories and fun stories now.”

“Oh! Miria! It’s the magician from that one building!” “You’re right!”

“Chris?!” “Christopher!” “...You’re finally here, hmm?” “Christopher! Where’s Rail?!”

As Graham, Isaac and Miria, and all of Larva cried out in astonishment, Christopher jerked his chin at Chané and Ladd, who hadn’t even noticed his arrival.

“Hey, this is peanuts. Forget this, watch the rest of that.”

“Hey, you wanna know somethin’? I met that Huey Laforet bastard,” Ladd said from out of nowhere.

Chané attacked anyway. “.....!”

Huey had told her some of what had happened at Alcatraz, so she knew Ladd had been there as well.

“There he was, snoring away, right in front of me... If I’d been one of those immortal folks, I coulda put my right hand on him and that woulda been it. What were you doing while your precious Huey was all vulnerable, huh? Strolling around New York, sightseeing? Nice! Man, I’m jealous! You were out here enjoying the Big Apple, and all it cost was Huey’s life! Whooee!”

“.....”

Ladd struck back as he taunted her. Chané jammed her knife into his fist, but it only scratched the surface a little, and then he knocked her arm away.

It’s heavy.

Chané narrowed her eyes, observing her opponent’s “weapon” without diluting her own deadly intentions.

From what she’d felt, she was sure the false hand was metal.

There was no telling how he’d trained, but even though the prosthetic came partway up his left arm, he was swinging that arm around just as rapidly as his flesh-and-blood fist.

Remembering her past humiliation, Chané was convinced: While it might be true that the man didn't have a gun, he was actually more of a threat now than he had been on the train.

“.....”

No matter which hand he used, every blow he paid out was phenomenally heavy.

If even one of those landed, she would be in trouble.

Even so, Chané darted into the gaps in that barrage of fists.

She banished the human life she'd had during the last few years, and her hopes for her own future, from her mind. Just for now, she even erased the conversations she'd had with her father over the past several days.

If she had any happiness left, she'd fear losing it.

That fear would become terror, and then her legs might go weak.

Huey had told her that to protect herself, to carry out her missions without fail, she always had to keep fear in her mind. For the moment, though, she got rid of that memory as well.

This man was using her fear as fuel.

In that case, it was fine if she was just an automaton.

On that thought, Chané mindlessly ran her blades along the best possible paths, turning herself into a system powered by killing intent.

On the other hand, this only sharpened Ladd Russo's hunger.

The woman was discarding her for Huey Laforet, and Ladd was delighted: She was a wall, and that wall would be extremely satisfying to demolish.

“Whoa! Yeah, I see!” Her knife grated against his prosthetic, and the sparks flew into Ladd's eyes. “I thought that Huey bastard was a cool customer, but I guess he would be, huh?” He took the sparks without even blinking, and his eyes shone as he shouted, “After all, he's got this thick, sick, slick trick of a wall!”

“.....”

“So how many more layers does this wall have? How close are you to Huey? ... Hey! I know you’re watching this from somewhere, bird-girl!”

When Ladd yelled that, several birds faltered in flight.

Nobody noticed, though. Most of them were busy wondering what he was talking about.

“Bird-girl! Go run a message to Huey! You tell him to line up all his walls in front of me! Tell ’im I can’t wait to see whether he can keep his cool after I’ve busted through all of them!”

It would have been natural to assume that a man who talked this much during combat was leaving himself wide open. However, even the members of Larva, who had been specifically designed for combat, and the twins who were circling the perimeter on their motorcycles, keeping an eye on the situation—all of them could tell that Ladd was giving no openings.

If Chané Laforet was an inexhaustible storm of blades, then Ladd Russo was the vast energy of a volcano on the verge of erupting, encased in a thick rubber skin.

These two dangerous objects were clashing, one pitting its speed against the other’s strength.

The people who knew what the pair could really do came to the same conclusion, and every one of them thought...

...If we even touch one of ’em, it’s not gonna end well for us.



Meanwhile, two figures were watching Ladd from the car.

“Uh... You’re sure we don’t need to shut that down, Ms. Lua?”

Shaft had decided staying outside came with a risk of taking damage from the fight, so he had returned to the driver’s seat and was talking with Lua.

“Ladd seems to be enjoying himself...doesn’t he? I was wondering what it would be like if I were as strong as that girl.”

“I think it’s probably best not to think that too much.”

“Do you? ...Sometimes I think if I were strong enough to fight Ladd in mortal combat, we would be able to understand each other better. I can’t make him that angry or make him smile that much, you know,” Lua said, a little wistful.

“But as women go, you’re far and away the one he likes best, Lua,” Shaft told her.

“Huh?”

“He said so, a while back.”

It was something another member of Sham had heard in prison, but Shaft kept that part to himself.

“Once, when some thugs messed with Ladd, I hear they asked him if he didn’t care what happened to his girl. And he told them, ‘Lua’s waiting for me to kill her. There’s no way she’d get killed by some other guy. I trust her more than I trust anyone.’”

“Ladd...said that?”

“...Well, I know it kinda sounds awful, but he really did believe in you, see? He trusted that you wouldn’t get killed by anybody else.”

When Ladd had said those lines to Firo, Sham had been down for the count, so his memories were pretty fuzzy. However, as he told the story, he cleverly filled in the blanks.

Lua was silent for a while. Then her pale face broke into a fragile, beautiful smile. “I see...,” she said, her voice a bit more cheerful than usual. “So Ladd said that about me...”

“Um, I know you could interpret it as him abandoning you when you were a hostage, but don’t, all right?”

“It’s all right. I know... But if I had become a shackle to him, and he broke that shackle to do something he wanted to do...it would mean he was the one who’d killed me, so I’d still be happy.”

“Uh...huh.” He responded noncommittally. *This lady’s a little weird, too.*

Lua went on, her cheeks flushed. “But then...Ladd remembered our promise, didn’t he...?”

Apparently, that was enough to satisfy her. She gave a sigh of relief, gazing rapturously at Ladd. “Oh, I wish everyone but he and I would expire peacefully at the peak of happiness, right this minute... Heh-heh. I know it isn’t possible, but I end up wishing anyway... It really would be better if I died, wouldn’t it...?”

“Please don’t ask questions I can’t actually answer.”

Maybe she’s more than a little weird..., Shaft thought.

Lua ignored him. Her eyes turned to the enormous bear and to the woman on its back. She cocked her head, perplexed. “...Isn’t that Miria? What do you suppose she’s doing up there?”



“Well, well. What should we do about this, I?”

“Those are Huey’s handpicked underlings. Is it okay if we just zotz them all, Me?”

“No, we shouldn’t interfere with the Runoratas’ guest. If anything, we should probably assist his people, but young Master Carzelio takes priority right now. Let’s secure the bear.”

“We’ll need to get a truck over here, though.”

Gabriel and Juliano stopped their motorcycles temporarily and sized up the scene.

A confused fight involving multiple parties had broken out abruptly. At this point, the situation had condensed into mortal combat between a man and a woman, but the murderous intent that radiated all the way to the fringes of the group made it obvious that the group melee had been safer. If one of those two had had a gun, no doubt several people would have been hit by stray bullets by now.

Given the danger, the pair had decided that Charlie, Cazze’s pet bear, couldn’t get hurt in the fray. They were planning to show him some food in an attempt to get him to follow them, but—

“Say, Me. Who’s that up on his back?”

“Who knows? It’s a mystery, I. However, they do seem very calm for people

riding a bear, don't they?"

"Hey, Miria, what do we do? Why did Ladd and Chané just start fighting like that?"

"Maybe they were hungry..."

"They do say hunger is the best spice! I hear wars were fought and villages plundered over salt, way back when... They say the Roman emperor Domi-what's-his-face fought using pepper!"

"I see! We make blinding powder with black or red pepper, too!"

Isaac had provided information that didn't quite fit the situation, and Miria nodded firmly.

The pair's thoughts seemed to be as vague as usual, but there was an unusual hint of unease in their expressions. In their own way, they were shaken.

To Isaac, Ladd was an important pal who'd looked out for him in Alcatraz, while to Miria, Chané was a precious friend who'd encouraged her when she'd been crying her eyes out over Isaac's imprisonment.

They'd clung to the bear, and then Ladd had suddenly started rampaging in Central Park. When Chané had come along, it had turned into a knife-and-fistfight, and the peculiar sight had left the two very confused.

As they tried desperately to figure out what was going on, Isaac came up with a deduction that was part wishful thinking. "...What if it isn't a fight?"

"What do you mean, Isaac?"

"Neither of them is hurt. They might be practicing for a show."

As a matter of fact, although the two were clashing fiercely, their only "injuries" were that the tip of Chané's nose was red, and that Ladd had a shallow cut on his throat that was bleeding slightly. From Isaac and Miria's vantage point, they couldn't even see it.

More than anything, neither of the combatants was making any wasted moves, which made the fight an extraordinarily beautiful thing to watch.

"Come to think of it...all these other people look like they belong to the circus,

don't they?!" Miria was surveying the members of Larva.

This seemed to give Isaac confidence in his own theory. He nodded firmly. "Don't they?! Maybe that noise back there signaled the start of the show. That's why this bear came to rejoin his circus companions!"

"Are Ladd and Chané going to be in the circus, too, then?"

"Yeah! I bet this is Romeo and Juliet's duel scene or something! They changed up the story! It's an opera where Romeo and Juliet fight with boxing and knives, and now there's even a circus! That has to be it!"

"Yes, it's Romeo versus Juliet!"

As Isaac shouted from the bear's back, most of the surrounding crowd ignored him. Meanwhile, Graham and Christopher started fantasizing about how *Romeo Versus Juliet* would go. The only direct reaction came from Ladd, who was right in the middle of the fight.

"Ha-ha! Those two don't change, huh! They're saying our fight to the death is a show!"

"....."

"Well, sure, why not?! Let's make the world watch us! All the world's a show anyway. Even Huey Laforet's terrorist revolution or whatever is just a stale performance to bring a little spice to the lives of faraway people through their newspapers! If we're supporting characters, then let's twirl and twist the world around until the whole planet is a mangled mess! Are ya with me, sister?!"

"....."

Wordlessly, Chané slashed at him. Knocking her blade away, Ladd asked a question that had been on his mind. "...Hey, so are you pals with Isaac and his girl?"

"....."

Chané didn't hear what Ladd had said.

She hadn't heard Isaac and Miria, either. She hadn't even noticed they were nearby.

Chané had become a system that existed only to slaughter Ladd, and she wouldn't stop until she was utterly exhausted or Ladd was dead.

For Ladd's part, watching that system near completion gave him a sense of twisted delight. He wanted to see the moment she realized the determination and resolution that had built it were all in vain, and his own engine kicked into high gear.

Even as he raised a ruckus, Ladd was also transforming into a machine meant to destroy his opponent.

Enraptured with the fight, Graham murmured to himself, "It's beautiful..."

He'd spent long years wrecking cars, and to him, Chané and Ladd's fight looked like beautifully assembled auto components, even though their mechanisms were completely different.

They were gears that meshed perfectly, rotating in opposite directions locked together, the strength of their convictions being the sole determining factor for which direction they spun. As he witnessed their exquisite balance, Graham was deeply moved, and yet the question of which way the gears would ultimately turn made him nervous.

Like Graham, Christopher was muttering, "That's pretty..."

As an unnatural being, Christopher had always respected nature. Right now, though, the man-made clash of knives and prosthetic hand struck him as a truly beautiful "natural sight."

It was like a volcano that had suddenly erupted in the middle of a plain where snow was falling. The view in his mind's eye was unbalanced, yet strangely harmonized, and it made him emotional as well.

Although their thoughts weren't as specific as those of the other two, the rest of the group was beginning to think the pair's clash was something sacred that must not be disturbed. It was as if, in a different sense of the word, the fight had passed into territory that was out of their reach.

There was no one who could butt in.

There couldn't possibly be.

And yet...*they* abruptly slashed through the harmony.

“.....?”

The first one to register the change was the girl in the stocking cap. She was a Larva member who specialized in spreading poison.

This smell...

Since she handled gases and powders, her nose had been *adjusted* by Salomé and the rest of the Rhythm team to be twice as sharp as the average person's.

The girl was a lab rat as well as a homunculus, and her nostrils had caught a scent they rarely picked up among the members of Larva.

Something smells...boozy?

Just as Chané and Ladd were about to unleash their next attacks on each other—

“Wha—?”

“.....!”

—they both lost their balance and *passed each other, spinning forward*.

As they did so, they registered something.

Just as they were about to connect with their opponent, some other force had abruptly been exerted on them.

What they'd just seen left the onlookers dumbstruck.

After all, they'd assumed no one could interrupt Chané and Ladd, but a red-faced old man had appeared out of nowhere and cut in—and when he touched the combatants lightly, they'd seemed to leap forward of their own accord.

Ladd and Chané had been set spinning without warning, but although they were disoriented, their exceptional reflexes let them get by with just falling to one knee.

As they started to get back up, they heard an old man's drawling voice. “*Hic... Are you kids drunk? Ish shtill afternoon...*”

Chané didn't recognize the man, while Ladd had only met him a few days

before. “Geezer... What was your name again, bastard? Alkie?” Frowning, Ladd glared at his elderly coworker. “What’re you getting in the way for? Huh? Are you lit? ...You always are, though.”

Alkie took a gulp from his hip flask. “We were s’posed to cut loose *after* we figgered out who th’ enemy was...*hic*...”

“Oh, well, that’s a cakewalk. This doll has ties to Huey Laforet. Ties to the Runorata Family. There’s no need to size her up. She’s been an enemy this whole time. As a matter of fact, she’s my archnemesis, geezer.”

“I see. In that cashe...”

Ladd was looking at the old man, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Chané had recovered a moment faster and was heading his way.

Ladd tried to meet her—but another figure cut in, distracting him with a flash of silver quite a bit longer than Chané’s knives.

“Don’t end her on yer own,” the old man was saying. “We’ll gang up on her and make shure.”

And a sharp metallic *clang* echoed through Central Park.

“——!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Long time no see, amiga! How’ve you been?”

Chané had caught the twin katana that had swung at her out of nowhere with her knives.

Her attacker was a striking contrast to herself: a brown-skinned hired killer who was all dolled up in a gaudy saloon girl costume. She and Chané had once crossed blades at Jacuzzi’s base, Eve Genoard’s second residence.

“It’s been ages since I got to fight with you like this, amiga! And we kept getting interrupted last time...”

“.....”

A step away, Chané leveled her knives, and the katana-wielding saloon girl beamed.

“Will you finish the dance with me this time?”

“Maria...Barcelito...!”

“Wait, Adele. Don’t you go.”

On seeing Maria, Adele had leveled her cross-shaped spear and tensed, preparing to lunge at the other woman. Tim clapped a hand onto her shoulder, firmly holding her back.

“But, Tim...”

She looked from Tim to Maria and back with obvious reluctance, but her boss slowly shook his head. “I know how you feel, but hang back for now.”

At the beginning of the uproar, Tim had worked his way over to a spot that was as far from the noise as was practical, and he had been monitoring the situation. The moment he saw Maria, someone they had some ugly history with, he knew he’d made the right call.

“It’s like some tornado out there right now. You might call me a wannabe psychic for saying so, but I’ve got a bad feeling about all that swirling energy over there. If you mess with it, you’ll get dragged in.”

“That isn’t a logical answer, but...your instincts are usually right, Tim.” Adele lowered her spear, resigned to watching over the fight from a distance.

As a matter of fact, Tim’s prophecy would prove to be correct.

The chaotic vortex had begun to pull in the most troublesome individual around.



A few minutes earlier In a car stopped beside Central Park

“I can go, right? Even if you say no, I’m going. They’ve found Cookie, and most of all, Chané’s here.”

“...I suppose there’s no help for it.”

The back seat of the car held a compact wireless set developed by Rhythm, and the voice that issued from it belonged to Melvi Dormентаire. The man who’d been in the back seat opened the door and got out without switching the wireless off.

The driver reached over and replied, “Are you sure, Mr. Melvi?”

“I don’t think we have a choice. We can’t have Rhythm and the local thugs taking each other out here.”

“Are those Ladd and Graham fellas that dangerous?”

“Yes. I’ve seen them fight once, at Firo Prochainezo’s casino. I doubt the members of Larva will be able to do a thing,” Melvi said, with conviction.

The driver’s voice grew tense. “They’re really that bad...? That guy headed over there empty-handed. You think he’ll be okay?”

“Don’t worry.”

“At that casino, Ladd and Graham couldn’t do a thing about him.”



“Oh... Oh, proclaim the end of the world of man as beasts swagger about upon it. Yet the trumpet of the end has not sounded, and the Revelation sneers at us... ‘O mankind, mankind! Fools! Thou art incapable even of death! Thou cannot even pray!’ It calls to us... Grasp it. Grasp it. The tragic remnants of faith and enlightenment, now living corpses, eat away at our words, clutching at their entrails...”

The Poet, who was watching the situation from a distance, spun an elaborate speech in an attempt to communicate the thought *This has gotten completely out of hand*. However, Sickie was facing off with Graham, and with no one nearby to shut him down, the Poet’s one-man show had dragged on and on.

Even so, while there may have been no one to stop him, someone appeared right next to him and egged him on. “Keh-keh-keh... Don’t you worry. No doubt the chaos will be swallowed up by even deeper lunacy soon. Did you know? Actual chaos takes the form of a person, and the trumpet of the end is shaped like a gun. I’ll be the one to ring the funeral bell. I’m no angel, but as Death’s messenger, you could say my ringing it is a natural law of this insane world.”

“What’s this...? He intends to sing! Sing a requiem that shaves off the inverse scale of the gods, incurring their wrath, and tells of the old world’s passing and a new world’s advent! He is both fool and hero! The people who sob, fearful of the coming of chaos and order, will surely press him for his name! Enraged

death agonies! Birth-cries filled with rejoicing! Everyone inquires! Curses upon his name! Blessings upon his name!”

“Heh... I’m not important enough to introduce myself, and there’s no point in names. Still, as a guidepost to lead you through a world filled with insanity, I’ll at least scratch it on a gravestone... My name is Smith. Gunmeister Smith. Remember that name and the sound of my guns and be proud whenever you’re afraid. Also, be grateful. Grateful for the fact that you aren’t yet insane.”

Mark Wilmens, the boy who’d been listening to the pair, murmured impassively to himself, “...How are these people managing to hold a conversation like it’s normal?”



Huh? What, that idiot Smith’s here? Hearing the distant voice, Ladd gave a mildly irritated smile. *That guy really is dumb. I’ll deck him later.*

He didn’t have any attention to waste on him right now, though.

First, he’d crush Chané, who was currently messing around with the saloon girl. He’d smash her arms and legs, then toss her at Huey’s feet.

With that ominous thought in mind, Ladd stepped deeper into the fight.

Hmm?

Just then, he felt a strange sizzling sensation on the back of his head.

He had a weird hunch that something dangerous was closing in.

But was it a good hunch or a bad one? Until the moment came, he wasn’t able to make that call.

Granted, as far as Ladd Russo was concerned, it was both good news and bad news.



“Hey.”

Sauntering onto the scene, the man came to stand behind Salomé.

“Wha—?! You’re...” Salomé was astounded.

Wearing a smile that could technically be called “innocent,” the man made a

request.

“Scuse me. Could I borrow *that* for a minute?”

He was pointing at Salomé’s portable loudspeaker.



“There, you see, Miria?! I bet it really is a circus rehearsal.”

“You’re right! That girl did magic tricks at Jacuzzi’s house, too, that one time!”

Even as Isaac and Miria chatted, the whirlpool of chaos was expanding.

“Ah-ha-ha! Amazing, incredible! Your moves are even sharper than they were last time we fought, amiga!”

Maria slashed at Chané over and over, fighting with a sword in each hand, while Chané countered with two knives of her own.

Their blades locked tentatively, and then they both stepped in close, each trying to slash their opponent’s vital spots as they slipped behind the other’s back.

Their movements were synchronized so well that they might have been twins. As they dodged their opponent’s blades, leaping into the air, they really did look as if they were performing a fierce sword dance.

“Hey, Saloon Girl. Butt out. Things were just getting good,” Ladd grumbled, but since he’d never been the type to insist on fighting one-on-one, he didn’t fly off the handle. That said, he seemed to feel as if his prey had been stolen; he sounded a little grumpy.

Maria was completely unfazed. “That’s no good, amigo. You’re part of our team right now. We aren’t supposed to act without permission, but hogging the enemy all to yourself is even worse!” She grinned.

So did a Gandor put her up to this? Ladd looked around. In the distance, he spotted a figure walking toward them through the trees.

It was his current employer, Luck Gandor. The man seemed to be watching him gravely.

I see. So he’s using this to advertise that we’re squaring off against the

Runorata Family, no holds barred?

Well, that's fine. It means we can all thrash Chané and make an example of her, then see how that Huey gink and the Runoratas react.

And that was the plan anyway.

Just as a vicious grin began to spread across his face, the surrounding situation began to move again. The members of Larva had seen Maria crash the fight, and they all grabbed their weapons and rushed her and the boozy old man next to her.

Up until now, they'd been overwhelmed by Chané and Ladd's duel. Deep down, their instincts had told them there was no way they could break into that.

Then, right under their noses, the old man and the saloon girl had cut in.

What had passed through their minds? Shame? Or envy?

In an attempt to overwrite their past selves, as if a dam had burst, a variety of violent types stormed into the vortex.

Frank was looking flustered, Tim was watching the situation unfold, Sickle was going toe to toe with Graham, and the Poet was conversing with a mystery man—but they were the exceptions. Most of the group rushed the people who seemed to be Chané's enemies.

"Let's see... It would really spice things up if somebody died right about now..." someone murmured in the midst of the uproar, but unfortunately, nobody heard.

After all...

BOOM!

The roar that blasted through Central Park made it seem as if the earth and air themselves were trembling.

The mutterings of the mystery man, the shouts of the group, the grizzly's howls, and every other noise was blotted out. It felt as if all the moisture in their bodies was quivering.

This was nothing like the bear's earlier roar.

The sound was basically its own form of assault. It was a shock wave of noise, and the individuals who'd taken it directly couldn't even open their eyes, not to mention hear anything.

How many seconds did it last?

They'd all left themselves wide open, but both allies and enemies were paralyzed.

The grizzly had also been badly startled, and he rose to his hind legs.

"Waugh?!"

"Eeeeeek!"

For the second time that day, Isaac and Miria tumbled off the bear's back.

The bear looked around, searching for the source of the sound.

He didn't immediately take to his heels. Part of the reason was that he was relatively used to loud noises because of the human cannon during his circus days—but his nose had picked up a clear scent in the vibrating atmosphere.

The scent of an old friend.

Then the grizzly's eyes found him.

The red-haired man who'd spent all those years in the circus with him.

"Testing, testing. Can you hear me? Huh, this thing's pretty loud even when you're using it the regular way."

With Salomé's portable speakers dangling from his right hand, the redhead sent his half-impressed, half-annoyed voice echoing through the loudspeaker.

"Damn, that's half-strength? What's your name? Salomé. Were you trying to use this on me at full power the other day? You should give a little thought to everybody else."

Their eardrums hadn't recovered yet, and most of them couldn't hear the amplified voice with any clarity. The shock to their ears had even made some people dizzy.

Still, Chané immediately understood what had happened. And she hated that she did.

Please, no.

She hated the fact that it had only taken her a moment to process the situation. Her heart constricted with self-loathing; she hadn't been able to entirely get rid of what she'd thought she'd discarded.

Even as warm emotions welled up in her heart, her brain was frantically rejecting them. She begged.

Please stay away.

Just this once, don't save me.

However, the moment she saw that flame-red hair, the wall of ice she'd built in her heart melted away.

If you show up, I'll feel relieved.

My drive to kill...is fading.

"Don't worry. You're fine just the way you are, Chané."

As if he'd heard her request and had embraced her anyway, the redhead spoke through the loudspeaker.

"I love you no matter what, and for better or for worse, I doubt your dad can change his attitude, either."



The next one to understand the situation was Ladd Russo.

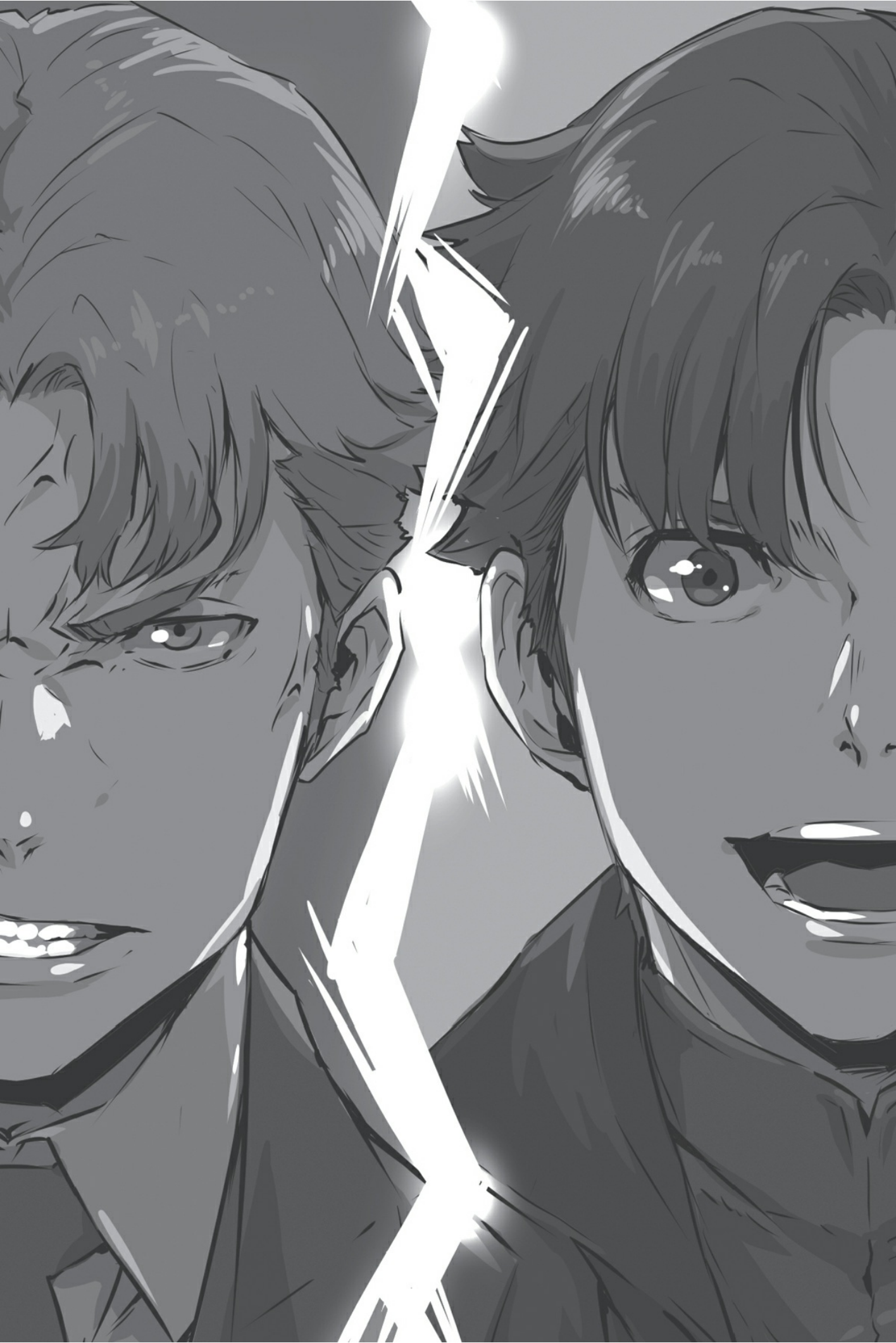
The hunch that had been scorching the back of his head for the past minute or so had been right on the money.

"Gingeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeer!"

Even though his eardrums hadn't completely recovered yet, he screamed until the veins were standing out on his face.

"You sonuva— Are you trying to reenact *that shit from before*? Did you time this? Were you trying to swoop in and save the day when that twist's back was against the wall? One wrong step and she woulda been dead, but you just knew

there's *no* way your timing could be off? Huh?!"



The redhead—Claire Stanfield, aka Felix—grinned with overflowing self-confidence and spoke through the loudspeaker. *“You nailed it. My timing’s never off. I started moving the second I saw Chané, though, all right? The world must have worked with me, adjusting fate so I’d be right on time.”*

Inside Ladd, something snapped. Was it blood vessels, or had he gone so tense that he was tearing muscle fibers?

Ladd felt the pain, but he converted it into anger. He braced to take a run at Claire, but—

“Hold up, Ladd Russo.”

“.....”

—the abrupt sound of his full name froze Ladd in his tracks.

It wasn’t because he was scared. He’d just gotten curious about what sort of crap the other guy was about to spout. He was pretty sure it would only make him angrier.

“I’m also sending this out to anyone who opposes Huey Laforet, Melvi Dormентаire, or the Runorata Family.”

“.....?”

Gabriel and Juliano, members of the Runorata Family, looked at each other.

“What could he be planning to say, I?”

“No clue. Forget about that; it’s still hard to hear, Me.”

They knew this was Melvi’s guard, but they didn’t know him well enough to guess what he’d say in this situation.

Without waiting for the man to speak, Cookie the grizzly ran up to Claire.

Claire gave him a signal, and Cookie crouched so that he’d have an easier time climbing onto his back.

Straddling the big grizzly, Claire pointed toward the sky.

“It all goes down tomorrow.”

“?”

Everyone's eyes were on him.

"At the Ra's Lance party tomorrow, my employer, Melvi Dormентаire, is having a big showdown against Firo Prochainezo of the Martillo Family. I'll be outside, guarding the door, to make sure nobody interrupts them."

Impassively divulging top-secret information in a park a few blocks over from Broadway, Claire spoke so eloquently he seemed about to burst into song.

"So listen up, supporting characters of my life. If you want to try humiliating me and killing me, just stop by to interrupt that match. If you're too scared, don't come near that building tomorrow. Simple rules, right?"

His words were completely unclouded.

They might be intended as a taunt, but as far as he was concerned, what he was saying was perfectly accurate.

"I won't run or hide. I'll just strike back with everything I've got."

"Hey, bastard...", Ladd growled as if he were about to drop dead of rage.

Claire glanced at him, then said something that really was just a taunt. *"Well, you could raise a little hell here, attract the cops, and get your elbows checked. That would work, too."*

"...Huh?"

"It would be a good excuse to run away from me. I won't stop you or anything. Frankly, I'd recommend it."

"_____"

Ladd's overflowing fury had spiked past his capacity to express in words.

Letting that anger burst from the roots of his limbs down to their very tips, Ladd lunged at his opponent. He'd even forgotten that the guy was straddling an enormous bear.

It was a superhuman leap.

His leg muscles screamed as he pushed them past their limit, but Ladd didn't care. With a wordless yell, he tried to slam his steel prosthetic into his enemy.

As far as he was concerned, even a ten-foot grizzly wasn't enough of an

obstacle to pose a threat.

However, a bear was still a bear.

“——!”

Ladd went sailing through the air thanks to a powerful sideswipe.

“.....?!”

He hadn't taken major damage, but he knew some sort of force had deflected his charge.

Meanwhile, the people who'd been watching that charge had seen everything.

Recognizing the approaching danger, the bear had snapped out its paw like the spring mechanism on a mousetrap and knocked him sideways.

Since he was Cazze's pet bear, his nails had all been blunted, but the true terror of a large bear isn't in their claws or fangs. To humans, their physical strength is more than enough of a threat by itself.

People said that a full-strength swipe from the hand-sized paw pads of a bear over six feet tall was pretty likely to kill you.

The impact alone would snap your neck or your spine.

The bear was used to this, too. Right before its paw connected, it had eased up and shoved Ladd out of the way, rather than trying to smash him.

For some reason, the circus had had a lot of enemies, and they'd been attacked by roughnecks quite a few times. His trainer, an individual by the name of Parrot, had taught the bear how to neutralize an enemy without killing them as one of his tricks.

“Whoa there, Cookie. I'm fine. Don't worry about me.” Shutting off the loudspeaker, Claire patted the bear's head, grinning. “Sorry about that. This guy's got a habit of swatting away folks who rush him with murder on the brain.”

Explaining that he'd been trained to do it was apparently too much work, so Claire fudged it by calling it “a habit.”

Ladd got to his feet. His temples were twitching. “Is that right...? Well, I’ve got nothing against the bear. I bet animals are desperate to live, anyhow. He’s done nothing wrong.”

“Good. So no problems, then.”

“Except...that means the owners should take responsibility, yeah? If you’re keeping a dangerous bear as a pet, you must not have the tiniest suspicion that you could die. In that case, I’d better discipline the owner instead, right? You get me?”

Ladd seemed to have decided that Claire was the bear’s owner. Cracking his neck, he started forward again, but he found himself held at gunpoint from both sides.

“That’s enough of that.”

“You don’t want your head blown off, do ya?”

Somewhere in there, Gabriel and Juliano had circled around and put Ladd between them.

“...? What the hell are you?” Ladd scowled.

“If you intend to harm that bear or its owner, then you are an enemy of the Runorata Family. Our enemy. In your position, I’m sure you understand what that means.”

“We’re saying we’ll let you off the hook if you stop now, so get lost.”

When he heard those two remarks—one superficially polite, the other not so much—the corners of Ladd’s lips rose.

“Well, ain’t that somethin’. That means we’ve been enemies this whole time.”

He was pinned between two guns. Naturally, these two weren’t amateurs; they wouldn’t hit each other if he moved. They were standing slightly behind him and off to either side.

Even so, Ladd’s composure didn’t slip. “This is great. I’m just living how I want, and these stomach-churning enemies keep showing up, one after another. If I was Holmes, it’s like I got a different Moriarty showing up every day. It don’t get better than that! Yeah! My life’s coming up red, red roses! I’m about to dye it

that bright-red color, see...?”

He swayed menacingly, then began shuffling like a boxer.

“With your blood!”

And then—a gunshot rang out.

It hadn’t come from either twin, but instead from behind Ladd.

Ladd put distance between himself and the twins, then looked toward the noise.

A bespectacled man in ragged clothes was standing there.

It was the man who’d been at the clinic, the type of guy Ladd hated.

Victor Talbot had been pointing his gun at the ground. Now he raised it toward the sky, bellowing at the whole group.

“That’s enough, you bastards! Don’t you dare throw your weight around like that in front of an agent from the Division of Investigation!”

The Division of Investigation.

When they heard that, several people exchanged looks, but most of the group just seemed perplexed.

What’s a DOI guy doing here?

Why are his clothes so torn up?

To the people who’d gathered in Central Park, the DOI was an enemy they’d prefer not to mess with, but a lone agent didn’t seem like much of a threat.

Still, that gunshot had been a problem.

They assumed Central Park had been closed off, due to maneuvering by either the Runoratas or Huey. However, if anyone had heard that gunshot, the police who’d been gearing up to capture the bear might flood in.

And indeed, they’d begun to catch glimpses of police uniforms in the crowd that was watching from a distance, at the park’s entrance.

“Whoops. I completely didn’t notice; we’ve got a Division of Investigation agent here? That’s not good, huh, Cookie. You’d better settle down or he’ll

shoot you dead.”

Maybe the grizzly understood: He moved his head in what looked like a nod, then crouched on the spot.

Once the bear was settled, Claire called to the surrounding group again.

“We’re a little jumbled right now, but it’s pretty simple, right? Me, plus everyone else who’s with Huey and the Runoratas, versus everyone who’s not.”

Even before he said that, the two camps had begun to form on their own.

The twins and Chané stood near the bear, and the members of Larva gathered around them, ready to defend.

Ladd, Graham, and the hitmen hired by the Gandors lined up in opposition.

The only ones who didn’t belong to either camp were Lua and Shaft in the car, Isaac and Miria, and a beet-red Victor.

“I wonder what they’re talking about. They said they’re splitting into camps; are they going to hold the Olympics or something?”

“Yes, Los Angeles! Lake Placid!”

“Or maybe this means the circus actually performs tomorrow, Miria.”

“I bet that’s it! Remember? They said that would be the last day of the casino party, too!”

As if in response, the last neutral individual walked over to them. “That’s right! Tomorrow’s going to be a party! They’ll have all sorts of people there: stage magicians and flimflam artists, sorcerers, and clowns! There’s going to be one hell of a romp in New York!”

“Really?! Oh, that’s right—you’re a magician. Will you be doing something there, too?”

“Yaaay! I can’t wait, Isaac!”

The couple’s eyes shone, and the man they’d called a magician grinned, nodding.

“Yeah, I plan to enjoy it to the fullest. I hope you have a blast tomorrow, too.”

Then the man—Christopher Shaldred—and Ricardo slowly headed over to Ladd's camp.

"Huh?"

The members of Larva looked uneasy. Christopher beamed at them...and let them know that their fears were well-founded.

"I'll be *on this side*. Keep it in mind if we run into each other tomorrow, okay?"

"Wha...?"

The others were speechless. Ignoring them, Christopher dropped a fist lightly into his palm, then pointed at the man who was up on the bear's back. "Oh, that's right! Members of Larva! About that redhead: We fought once, and he won. He thrashed me pretty good. So good I couldn't recover. That's pretty amazing, so you should all compliment him for it."

Claire's eyes lit up, and he looked around at the Larva group. "There, see?! I wasn't lying! Go on! Tell me all you want how great I am!"

The tattooed woman responded sharply, without even glancing at him. "Later."

"Later, huh? ...Well, the situation is what it is, I guess. I'll wait for a little bit. After all, I'm the type who can read a room."

While more than half of the people present fought back the urge to scream *You liar!* confusion spread through the ranks of Larva.

"...Are you turning against us because this fella's on our side, Chris?" Sickie asked, speaking for the group.

Christopher shook his head slightly. "No. It doesn't matter whether he's there or not."

"Then why?! Are you betraying Master Huey?!"

"No, not at all. It's just that I'm on vacation right now." He grinned like a mischievous kid, then shrugged lightly. "It's sort of like, I can't turn down a request from a friend? Oh, just so you know, Rail's probably going to be *on this side*, too."

“What’s this about?!”

“Well, personally, I’d rather not think about anything as barbaric as fighting you to the death, either. But see, Sickie and Chi and Adele, and also Leeza, who’s listening in remotely... You all knew what I’m like, didn’t you?” Then, as if he felt he’d just had a genius idea, Christopher’s eyes lit up. “I know! Why don’t all of you come join me over here?! That would fix everything!”

“Don’t screw with us! That would mean opposing Master Huey, and you know it!”

“...I’m not so sure about that.” Christopher’s smile abruptly vanished.

Sickie’s eyebrows drew together. “What?”

“At the moment, my enemy is this guy named Melvi. That’s why I’m going against that redhead over there. He’s Melvi’s guard... Actually, never mind. It looks like I don’t have time to explain.”

A horde of policemen was sprinting toward them.

“...Pull out!” Salomé ordered, and the members of Larva evacuated rapidly, sending forlorn glances at Christopher as they left.

Frank seemed particularly concerned, but Christopher reassured him: “You don’t have to worry. Rail’s fine.” Relieved, Frank disappeared at a speed that didn’t seem possible for his huge frame.

“Tch... What the hell? It’s just the cops. Gutless chumps.”

“What should we do, Ladd?”

“Those cops are the real deal; they’re braced to fight a bear. Going up against them would be a yawn.”

Then Ladd set off, too, running toward the car where Lua waited.

As he went, he shot a glance over his shoulder at the bear’s rider. A vast desire to kill seethed inside him.

“...Perfect. Bring it on. I’ll take you up on that challenge.”

Claire, the target of that homicidal intent, held a hand out to Chané. “Let’s go, Chané.”

“.....”

Chané gave him a sharp, wordless glare. It wasn't exactly murderous, but there was clear hostility in it. She apparently had no intention of climbing onto the bear, but when Claire gave a signal, Cookie dexterously tossed her onto his back.

“?!”

Then the grizzly broke into a run.

The twins took off after them on their motorbikes.

“Can we say this ended well, Me?”

“That's an excellent question. If his taunt has succeeded, it would probably be best not to summon young Master Cazze to the casino tomorrow evening... For goodness' sake. Intentionally telling our opponents the schedule of the individual he's protecting. What a terrible guard, I.”

The enormous bear was running as fast as a car, but thanks to her experience, Chané managed to stay on its back without losing her balance.

“.....”

She was still glaring, and Claire apologized meekly. “Sorry about getting in your way. You were trying to retake your old self, right?”

“.....!”

“Listen, I don't think your dad wants you to be exactly the same as before. He wants the version of you who's changed here and there. I get the feeling he likes experiments and changes and stuff.”

“.....”

Not only had he guessed her exact thoughts, he'd mildly explained why they were wrong. Chané was clearly flustered—but Claire nodded at her, wearing a smile that brimmed over with confidence. “Don't worry. I like all the versions of you there are, Chané.”

“.....” Chané sulked, but her hostility had faded quite a bit.

She's cute this way, too, Claire thought. Then something occurred to him, and

he said it aloud. “You know, you really do look just like your parents.”

“.....?”

Chané didn’t know her mother, so the remark struck her as extremely odd. However, since she wasn’t ready to share her thoughts with Claire, she let it slide this time.

She had no idea that her mother was currently here in New York City.



“Uh... Erm, you okay, Assistant Director?”

Victor Talbot, who was still dressed in tatters, had been arrested by the NYPD as a “suspicious gun-wielding character.”

Shooting a glare at Bill and Donald, who’d only just arrived, Victor *tsked* in irritation. “What the hell do you think? My body’s just fine, but do you think I’ve got any pride left after that, you idiots?”

“Oh... I know how you feel.”

“Then get moving already. Prepare to coordinate with the police. Make sure they know they owe us for the false arrest, too.”

“Assistant Director, what are you planning?” Donald asked.

Behind Victor’s cracked glasses, there was a sharp light in his eyes. “Tomorrow, all the criminals are gonna gather in one place for us. That’s probably where Huey will make his move, too. No matter what, the police and the DOI are going to settle the score once and for all.”

After issuing that order, Victor added a word of warning.

It was about the man who, in a way, might be the incident’s biggest dark horse.

“...Don’t let Senator Beriam catch on. If that neat freak’s trying to clean up this town, there’s no telling what he’ll do.”



Evening The Martillos’ underground casino

“Well...I guess I’d better get ready.”

The second night of the Ra's Lance casino party would begin in a few hours.

Firo was running a gambling den, and he wanted to get there early to set up.

He was really there for the showdown with Melvi the next day, but he didn't even know exactly what their showdown would consist of. Until then, he'd do his best at the casino party and try not to disgrace the Martillo Family.

His biggest objective was rescuing Ennis. He hadn't forgotten that for a moment. But he also knew there was nothing he could do right now, though, and that any careless attempts might put her in danger.

"Okay. Let's see if I'll get a clearer picture of what he's up to today..."

Frankly, the thought that Ennis was still locked up nearly drove him out of his mind.

He still had a vivid memory of being abducted and held captive by a pedophile once, when he was a kid.

If Keith and Pa Gandor had been just a little later rescuing me, I woulda been...

The incident had been traumatic. Ordinarily, summoning any more details of the memory would have made him go pale, but now it actually focused his mind.

If you've put Ennis through something like that...then I don't give a damn who you are, Melvi Dormентаire.

With a heart as calm as still water, he mentally sharpened a blade that existed solely to skewer his enemy where it would hurt the most.

Firo gradually honed a fury that was the exact opposite of Ladd's.

As he worked, an old memory surfaced.

That takes me back. I haven't felt this raw since the time the Phantom Father kidnapped Keith, way back when.

A murderer who claimed to have "steel stakes for the bad, candy for the good" had appeared in New York and kidnapped Keith for being a mafia boss, the symbol of evil.

We managed to corner the guy, thanks to Claire, but he got away.

Come to think of it...could that priest have been an immortal?

No, hold it.

I've got...that guy's memories? His own memories...?!

The memory had been like a key in a lock, and information about the "Phantom Father" flooded into his mind from a part of him he hadn't been aware of.

He's...in Szilard's memories... Dammit! What the hell?! So that priest really did have ties to Szilard?!

At the same time, the murdering priest's memories flowed into him as well.

.....

When he killed people, he really did believe he was saving the world...

These memories from an enemy whose face he'd half forgotten, and the knowledge of how he'd ended, left Firo feeling very strange.

It made him wonder whether Melvi might actually have a legitimate reason for resenting him.

Even so.

Firo wasn't self-sacrificing enough for that to make him hesitate.

I don't care if he kidnapped Ennis for the sake of world peace... That's its own thing. It's no reason to forgive him.

Well, I'll feel better about getting rid of him if he's an asshole, but that's just me being selfish.

Smiling wryly, Firo grabbed a nearby chair and sat down, getting the contents of his bag in order.

Just then, he heard the door at the top of the stairs open.

Is that Christopher and Ricardo?

Firo got up, planning to give them instructions for Jacuzzi's group.

However, the figure who'd appeared at the top of the stairs wasn't Christopher or Ricardo. It wasn't even a member of the Martillo Family.

“You’re...”

The newcomer spoke to Firo, and the current of fate shifted again.



The Runorata villa Melvi’s room

“You’ve certainly done it now.” When his guard told him what had happened, Melvi sighed. “Why would you do a thing like that?”

“Had to. I did it to protect you.”

“...Excuse me?”

“It’ll be better to get the enemy all in one place, or as close as we can manage. There’s only one of me, after all. It’ll be easier to have me take them all on together than dealing with them scattered around, right?”

The man spoke as if this was only natural. *How arrogant is this guy?* Melvi thought with disgust. However, since he did know what his guard was capable of, he couldn’t completely reject the idea.

“This job isn’t about guarding just one person,” Claire continued. “You seem to think this is a personal fight between you and Firo, but if it was, you shoulda jumped him in an alley on a dark night or something.”

“.....”

“You wanted to thrash him in front of an audience, I know. You wanted to show him what you could really do. So here we are. I just streamlined it for you.” With no hesitation, Claire declared that he was the one in the right, and Melvi frowned. “I’m concerned about you, see. I’m not actually sure you’ll survive until the day after tomorrow.”

“...? It’s your job to keep me alive, isn’t it?”

“Not quite. My job is to get rid of anyone who gets in your way so that you can do what you’re here to do. What you’re here for is that match with Firo. If he snuffs you out in the middle of it, that’s not my problem.” The casual note vanished from Claire’s voice, and his expression turned serious. “Don’t think I’m playing favorites because he’s an old pal of mine. If you really wanted me to protect you from him, I wouldn’t take you to wherever this showdown’s

supposed to be. I'd go rescue his girl and lock you away somewhere in Alaska until Firo's cooled down. And yes, I said 'you.'"

"You may not be playing favorites, but don't you think you're overestimating him a bit? Are you saying I'm inferior to Firo?"

"Yeah. Wait, was that not obvious? I just figured you were a go-getter who liked to fight above his weight class."

Claire had responded without missing a beat, and Melvi's face went taut. "What makes you think a nobody rotting on the vine in some wretched little syndicate is 'above my weight class'?"

At that, all emotion vanished from Claire's expression, and he faced the other man squarely. "Let's get one thing straight."

"....."

"The world's mine, and I don't think I'll ever die. I've got no plans to lose to anyone, and I don't back down when I think it's right." Melvi was bewildered by his bodyguard's seemingly random claims about himself, but Claire ignored him, continuing. "That said, if I ever really lost my mind and tried to hurt Chané or the Gandors...I think Firo's the only one who'd be able to stop me."

"....."

Melvi hadn't expected the conversation to go this way, and his confusion deepened.

This man was absolutely convinced he was the strongest one around, yet he'd considered the possibility that he might lose to someone. That was surprising enough, but on top of that, the "someone" in question was the immortal who had nothing but knife skills?

Not only that, but it was pretty likely that Claire didn't even know Firo was immortal in the first place. That meant he thought an ordinary human might surpass him.

"What gives you such a high opinion of Firo Prochainezo?"

"Well, it's something even he hasn't picked up on. And I don't owe you an explanation," Claire replied flatly before getting to the bottom line. "But I'm

contractually obligated to protect you, so consider yourself warned, all right? I may be perfect, but protecting a guy who chugs poison on purpose isn't a job for a bodyguard. You should go to a doctor for that stuff."

"I really don't understand. You've had a high opinion of him and the Gandors this whole time, but if they're truly that impressive, I can't see it."

"Well, call me biased if you want. Don't forget, though—you've been warned."

Claire said it one last time, just to make sure.

He wasn't trying to harass Melvi in any way. He seriously considered this part of his job as a guard.

"Firo's someone who might be able to take *me* down."

Linking Chapter I Can't Help but Think There's Something to It

Ra's Lance The basement restaurant

And so the second night of the casino party rolled around.

"Mgh, Niiice... Do we really have to go? We do, don't we...?"

"Jacuzzi... Saying that at the hideout or the building's entrance would be one thing, but saying it in here is weird."

Jacuzzi was standing in the door of the casino hall, his eyes filling with tears.

Their group would have drawn too much attention if they all showed up at once, so Nick and the others were entering the building in twos and threes.

A big guy like Donny would be spotted right away. However, since everyone was wearing similar tuxedos and evening gowns, it wasn't possible to tell who else belonged to their group without taking a close look at their faces.

After the previous day, Jacuzzi had nearly collapsed from nervous strain, and he'd slept until evening. Nice tried to encourage him. "You were lucky you slept so late today. I hear there was a bear in Central Park at noon, and even the police were in an uproar."

"A-a bear?!"

"If you'd gotten up early and gone for a walk, you might have gotten caught up in all that. So you see? Luck is on your side. Keep that up and win at the casino, too."

Nice usually spoke a bit more casually around Jacuzzi, but she was currently wearing an evening gown and feeling rather like a rich young lady.

Jacuzzi thought, *Nice sure is pretty*, but he didn't have the courage to tell her. He kept slipping further into pessimism. "That bear... Do you think they caught

it? Or did they kill it...? What if they shot it dead, and now it hates humans and wants to come back to haunt us? I don't know how to fight a ghost bear if it attacks us..."

It sounded like a joke, but Jacuzzi was getting jumpy, as if he genuinely thought there might be a spectral beast around.

Gazing at him fondly, Nice took his hand and began to lead him around the room. "Come on. Today is going to be mostly about watching and waiting again, but let's play the part of high rollers as best we can, shall we?"

"Agh, agh-agh, wait, Niiice!"

Behind the pair, a scowling shadow was watching them. "A-ain't that...? They told me they didn't have any dough, so what're they doing here?! Were they here yesterday, too?!"

Fearful of the Gandors, Dallas Genoard had snuck in, disguising himself with a false beard.

"Dammit... What are they trying to pull? If they're making enough rhino to play at a place like this, then as their landlord, I'll have to go collect..."

He wanted to grill them right this minute, but if he got careless and drew too much attention, the Gandors might spot him. Keeping his irritation to himself, Dallas decided to slowly circle the casino and case it for a table he'd definitely be able to win at.

Granted, there was no such thing as a table anyone could definitely win at...



Melvi Dormентаire was in a bad mood.

His pride was everything to him, and Claire Stanfield's declaration that he was Firo's inferior had become a thorn that kept needling him with unbearable humiliation.

He liked to flatter himself that he was a chosen one.

His pride was supported by the Dormentaires, and it had given him confidence. It hadn't been long before it had sublimated Melvi into an "exceptional being," as advertised.

As a matter of fact, excluding a handful of individuals, Melvi considered the people around him to be mere pawns, there to be used.

He thought of “abnormal” people such as other immortals and Claire as exceptions, but even then, he assumed he’d be the one to control them in the end.

Both Huey’s hand on his head and the warning from Claire had been utterly humiliating, and the first thing had actually frightened him.

However, even after admitting that, he still believed he could ultimately surpass them.

Szilard Quates had been a genius who’d once tried to acquire the whole world for himself.

By rights, his knowledge should have gone to Melvi.

Even Melvi understood that what he lacked most was experience.

That was why he wanted the “experience” Szilard Quates had accumulated more than anything.

Szilard had wanted youth, while Melvi wanted experience. If one could have fused their two spirits, Sham-like, everything would have been perfect.

Yet Szilard no longer existed.

All that remained of him was his vast knowledge, and that was inside the skull of a two-bit thug named Firo.

Feeling an intense urge to kill Firo, who was somewhere in this same casino, Melvi maintained his sociable facade and kept an eye on his “marks.”

Just one more day of kissing up to this trash.

What part of this is a gamble? What part of it is testing your luck? People like you lost the bet the moment you were born.

Possibly it was because his body had been based on the Avaro family head, but he’d always had a tendency to look down on others. Right now, though, Melvi was trying to rid himself of his fear of Firo and the humiliation Claire had dealt him by doubling down on this conviction.

They all look the same.

Melvi shrugged internally, keeping an “agreeable young dealer” expression plastered across his face. He was running a perfectly ordinary poker table.

There was nothing ordinary about Melvi’s skills, though.

Put briefly, he was cheating.

He cut the cards in a way that seemed natural, but in fact, he was cleverly controlling where they went. He’d made his table look like an easy place to win at first glance, and then he had been relieving customers who could place large bets of all their money.

The oblivious gamblers kept coming. As he watched their shifting emotions, Melvi felt a sadistic sense of superiority. It was hilarious, the way they talked about good luck and moaned about bad luck, never knowing it was all by design.

Behind his breezy smile, Melvi wore a smirk. He basked in the feelings of someone who was playing God—but then the current changed.

“Hey there. Remember me?”

Someone had taken a seat at his table.

“You’re... Ah. Yes.”

He didn’t remember his face, but that prosthetic left hand was familiar. It was a feature he’d shared with that character on the watch list, Ladd Russo.

He’d seen this man in passing at Firo Prochainezo’s casino and used him to harass Firo. To Melvi, the man was no more than a pebble he’d picked up to throw at his enemy.

What was someone like that doing here?

Inwardly, Melvi felt dubious. The man’s flesh-and-blood hand toyed with several orange chips, the most expensive denomination. “I did win on the slots, thanks to you.” His smile held clear hostility, and there was a glare in his superficially warm eyes. “I came to repay you, see?”

Something’s off. Is this really that timid fellow? Melvi felt a flash of suspicion,

but he didn't let it show in his expression. *Well, that's fine. I don't know what he's planning, but if he intends to give me money, I'll take it. I can cheat, but I'm not letting scum like this get away with doing it to me.*

Even after seeing those expensive orange chips, he held the man in contempt.

The man wasn't an immortal, and he wasn't anyone particularly unique. He was probably just a pathetic individual whose only talent was getting dragged into things.

Unaware of what was going through Melvi's head, the man with the prosthetic hand gazed out over the area run by the Runoratas. "I see... All sorts of poker, blackjack, baccarat, and roulette, huh...? What, no slots?"

"Bringing them in would have been too difficult. Go ahead—play at any table you'd like."

"Yeah... I'll take my time and do that."

Carlotta, who had been watching as a guest, had seen this exchange play out. Later on, while she and the twin guards were having lunch together, she told them about it.

"Yes, Melvi was underestimating his opponent.

"He wasn't completely careless, though... Just so you're aware. For the sake of his honor.

"After all, thirty minutes later, he'd become a complete laughingstock."



Thirty minutes later

"Things are really noisy over there... It isn't the ghost bear, is it?" Jacuzzi turned pale.

As Nice tugged him along, she looked a little exasperated. "Those are cheers, Jacuzzi. Not screams. It sounds like they're coming from the Runorata Family's area."

"Eep?! Th-the Runoratas?! I'm scared, Nice—let's not go!"

Jacuzzi's eyes were teary, but when he realized he was being dragged toward

a couple of familiar faces, he felt just a little relieved.

“Hey, Jacuzzi! You’re here, too, eh?!”

“Yes, and Nice!”

Isaac and Miria called to them cheerfully, and Nice took the opportunity to ask the question that was on her mind. “That’s quite a racket over here. What’s happening?” She tried to see through the cheering crowd, but it was too dense.

Excited, Isaac and Miria explained.

“Do you know Nader?! He’s Ladd’s friend, and he’s proxy gambling for Miss Genoard!”

“He just won reeeally big. He made fifty thousand dollars!”

“Fifty thou...” Just hearing that amount almost made Jacuzzi pass out.

Even if the recession had lowered values, in this era, fifty thousand dollars was a huge fortune.

During Prohibition, the salary of a special agent was between fifty and one hundred dollars a week, so this was clearly far too large a sum to win in a single night of gambling.

That said, some claimed Al Capone had made between ten million and thirty million dollars a year at the height of his career. Compared with that, this was chump change.

So which was it? A vast fortune or chump change?

One look at the face of the man at the center of the crowd made the answer clear.

Melvi Dormентаire was stunned, as if time had stopped.

The man who’d built a mountain of chips in front of him raised his prosthetic hand high, acknowledging the applause from the crowd.

At this point in time, there was no way for Nice, Jacuzzi, or most of the crowd to know what had gone down at that table.

However, even before the details got out—the name of a gambler raced through the casino party, leaping from one guest to another.

Nader Schasschule.

This was where the legend of the hero who pulled the Genoard family back from the brink of ruin began.



Several hours later The Beriam residence

“Something unusual has happened.

“I’m told a man made off with quite a tidy sum in a solid winning streak at the Runorata Family’s table. The family took a significant loss, and he’s now being watched from several quarters,” said Senator Manfred Beriam.

From his seat on the sofa, Spike laughed cheerfully. “How ’bout that! So we’ve got ourselves a daredevil, huh? If that was just good luck, when you think about what’s bound to happen later, it was more like bad luck. Hell, the biggest bad luck of his life... If I dusted that guy, do you s’pose they’d let me keep the money?”

He leered, but what Beriam said next wiped the smile right off his face. “Nader Schasschule. That’s the name of the man who won that checkered luck.”

“Scuse me?”

“It sounds as if he was once active in the Lemures with you.”

“...Huh?”

No, no, no, wait, hold up.

Is Mr. Beriam talking in his sleep or something?

“Nah, that can’t be right. I mean, he got...”

“He’s alive. That’s all that matters. I hadn’t mentioned it, but he’s the man who informed us of the Lemures’ detailed plans.”

“.....”

The guy was alive.

That was astounding enough on its own, but it wasn’t all. The man was currently the center of attention at that casino party as well.

Beriam spoke in a matter-of-fact way. “The timing’s too good. I can’t help but think there’s something to it. Find out who’s backing him, what he’s after, everything. If this was set up by someone whose interests don’t align with ours, we may need to consider eliminating him.”

Spike shook his head slowly, stunned. “That’s just...nuts.”

As he sat there in shock, his ears picked up a distant gunshot.

It was his own apprentice, out on the firing range. Right now, though, it sounded much farther away to him than it usually did.

Sonia, who was honing her sniping skills as usual, didn’t know yet.

She had no idea that the childhood friend she believed was a hero was currently very close, in more ways than one.

Or that he’d become a con man who’d falsely assumed the title of “hero” and was trying to con the whole world.

Linking Chapter—B-side There's No Tomorrow for Us

One day later A water storage facility somewhere in New York

Manhattan got its water from the abundant snowmelt that flows down from the mountains in upstate New York.

Massive amounts of water traveled from the New Croton Dam and the Catskill Mountains, down aqueducts dozens of miles long, and into reservoirs in Manhattan.

The waterworks had formerly been managed by a large corporation, but the city had purchased them in 1932. Now under the direct control of the municipal government, they supplied the water used in daily life in Manhattan and its surroundings.

In one such water supply facility...

In a facility that held the water that would run from most of Manhattan's taps stood two figures who weren't employees.

"You're really going to do this?" Salomé Carpenter asked.

He'd spoken to a man with bandages over one eye: Huey Laforet.

"Yes. It is my objective, after all. Both the Division of Investigation and the eyes of the mafia will be riveted on Ra's Lance by now... I imagine Firo and Melvi are in the middle of their big match."

"I hear there was some sort of trouble yesterday, and *an additional guest* has been invited to their gaming table."

"Yes, I heard that, too. It appears to be an individual that Leeza and Chané have some history with. I suspect Melvi is having a hard time as well."

In the darkness, Huey was standing in front of a supply pump.

"Long ago, even Manhattan drew most of its water from wells. However, once

plagues began to sweep through the city, the construction of the waterways progressed rapidly... Those were the days.”

“It’s terribly moving to hear these things from you, Master Huey. You actually saw it all happen.”

“Well, now... I’m curious about what Renee and Fermet are up to, but at the very least, I’m sure Renee isn’t here.” As Huey spoke, he walked on slowly.

Gazing at the bottle in Huey’s hand, Salomé swallowed hard. “...So the time of evolution is finally at hand.”

“It could end up being regression, you know.”

Smiling dryly, Huey took another step forward. Then a footstep that wasn’t his echoed in the facility. At first Huey thought it might be his imagination, but the sound continued even after he stopped moving. Measured footsteps echoed around them, coming closer.

“.....” Narrowing his eyes, Huey gazed into the darkness.

“Who’s there?!” Salomé shouted, feeling intensely wary. He was sure he’d put the facility’s entire staff to sleep.

No one responded to his yell. Little by little, the footsteps drew nearer.

And then—a man stepped into the circle of light cast by the lantern they’d left on the ground.

“.....?”

Huey didn’t recognize the man.

He appeared to be somewhere between his late fifties and midsixties. He had deeply chiseled features, and his eyes seemed tranquil at first glance.

When the man saw Huey, he shrugged. “You’re Mr. Huey Laforet, are you?” Stopping where he was, he went on candidly. “They tell me you’re over a hundred and fifty years older than I am. I’m the one who’s aged, though. Funny world, isn’t it?”

“Indeed. Never a dull moment.”

“Sure you don’t need to go to Ra’s Lance? Your little henchmen are there,

right?”

At that, Huey was sure the man not only knew about the immortals but had connections to the casino party as well. Studying him carefully, he answered this “older” man who was younger than he was. “They are there so that I can be here. Unfortunately, there are now others here, such as yourself. So...does this mean I’ve lost the gamble?”

“Life is a gamble, that’s true. There’s always a chance to turn things around with a single roll of the die, but you could also keep striking out forever. Unlike at a casino, though, you can attract a jackpot by working hard for it.”

With another shrug, the old man shook his head somewhat melodramatically. “However, send the good luck and bad luck to the young folks out on the street. For those of us who’ve strayed from the path, it’s not about luck. Retribution’s a better fit for us. There’s no place for us on Luckstreet anymore.”

That comment narrowed down Huey’s candidates for the man’s identity.

The man might have been elderly, but he didn’t seem to have faded at all. As a matter of fact, he had an intimidating air that could probably overwhelm younger people with ease, something similar to what Bartolo Runorata possessed.

Huey chuckled. “Am I sure I don’t need to go to Ra’s Lance...? I believe I should be asking you that question.”

“Oh?”

“Your precious foot soldiers are gambling with their very lives.” Coming to stand directly in front of the other man, Huey spoke his name with a certain respect. “Isn’t that right...Mr. *Molsa Martillo*?”

Molsa Martillo grinned at Huey, a much older man with far more experience. “If we don’t need to introduce ourselves, shall we get right down to business?”

“What business is that?”

“That should be obvious. The wager of negotiations.” With a self-deprecating smile, Molsa slowly started forward. “That said... There’s no luck here, good or bad. Just poetic justice. It’s a simple gamble—and depending on your answer,

the chips may soon spell out *revenge*.

“That’s what suits those of us who’ve stepped off the path. Isn’t it?”



The third night of the casino party.

A gambling craze enveloped New York City.

One person bet money, another bet pride, a third bet their life, a fourth their future, and they all threw themselves into their separate wagers.

However, the end was coming up fast.

As all the cards they’d been dealt were revealed, the final crazy ruckus, a *baccano* in and around Ra’s Lance, was about to begin.

Baccano!
1935-D The End

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BACCANO!

1935 END & EPILOGUE

AFTERWORD

It's been a while; this is Narita. Seriously, it's *really* been a while.

So this was the first *Baccano!* in about three years—and I'm so sorry. In a previous afterword, I'd said this might end up being five volumes long, and that prediction was accurate: The arc will conclude with the next volume, *End & Epilogue!*

I was actually planning to make this volume a total brick and wind things up here, but it's been three years since I last wrote a *Baccano!* book. I've forgotten this and that, and my feel for things has slipped a bit in places. I decided the ending was going to be pretty weak if I forced it to happen here, and so I'll be wrapping things up with one more book. To those of you who were looking forward to the finale, I'm really sorry.

I imagine some of you are thinking, *Hey, c'mon, are you gonna keep us waiting another three years, then?! ...*Well, don't worry about that. I've talked it over with the Dengeki editorial department, and we've gotten my schedule for the next six months nailed down.

My upcoming schedule for Dengeki Bunko has *Applaud with Izaya Orihara* in autumn, *Fate/strange Fake*, Vol. 4, in winter, and after that (the end of winter, or some point in spring?), *Baccano! 1935—End & Epilogue!*

In the meantime, it's likely that various other jobs will come in, including some from other publishers. Still, this is how it's going to go at Dengeki Bunko, so thank you for your understanding!

By the way, the original plan and progression have changed over the past three years, too. There were changes to the plot as well. For example, Cookie was originally supposed to rampage night after night and attack mafia men...! But in light of recent reports of bear attacks, I decided to shelve that part. That said, it's dangerous to get all buddy-buddy with a bear the way Isaac and Miria do, so please steer clear of them in your everyday lives!

Still, three years... They say it takes three years for peach and chestnut seeds to bear fruit, and eight for persimmon trees; in the time it takes to grow peaches, all sorts of things have happened. I developed this disease called anaphylactoid purpura (I'm currently recovered), spent eighteen months straight working on bonus novels for the *DRRR!!* DVDs, started my new series *Fate/strange Fake*, did the writing for the manga *Stealth Symphony*, and took my first crack at writing the script for a game called *Heaven x Inferno*... A whole lot of things. From here on out, I'd like to adjust my mind a bit and write in a balanced way that includes *Baccano!* If I get the chance, I'd love to fit in some *Vamp!* and *Etsusa Bridge* volumes, too!

So after that long blank, what got me psyched up to write *Baccano!?! It was Shinta Fujimoto's Baccano!* manga, the one that's running in *Young GanGan!*

I never dreamed the first book of this series, which I wrote thirteen years ago, would get more multimedia projects...! Fujimoto practically knows more about *Baccano!* than I do; he'll put little jokes in the corners of panels and things, and I look forward to every chapter!

The incident I mention in this book—Keith's kidnapping by the Phantom Father—is a story in the prequel volume, a complete manga original. I'd love it if fans of the original picked up the *Young GanGan Baccano!* as well!

*And now for the usual thank-yous.

To my supervising editor, Wada (Papio), and the rest of the Dengeki Bunko editorial department. To all the copy editors, for whom I always cause trouble by working too slowly, every single time. To the staff in all the departments at ASCII Media Works. This time, I really can't apologize enough...!

To the people who are constantly taking care of me: my family and friends, and other writers and illustrators. And to Katsumi Enami, who produced even more appealing drawings of all these characters, even though it had been three years. The character picture posts on Enami's Twitter are a must-see!

...And to everyone who read this book.

All the people I've just mentioned have my deepest gratitude. Thank you very much!

July 2016, while frolicking with a flower in Undertale—Ryohgo Narita

Also, check it out! There's a special bonus on the next page! Shinta Fujimoto, first you draw the preview manga for *Dengeki Bunko MAGAZINE*, and now this... Thank you so much!

BACCANO! 1935-D

Congrats on the release!

The comic version hit stores on the same day, and I'm thrilled!

Thanks for supporting
Young
GanGan
Comics'
Baccano!,
too!

Fujimata
Shinta



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